¡Ojalá!

stories

Sara Barrett

for my eighth, ninth, and tenth great-grandparents,
who called Kongo Dya Ntotila home

May their reunion in mfinda be perpetually joyful.

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Old Granddad

A Meeting

Texas — back when it was bigger *and* smaller than it is today, back when it was calling itself a Republic — was our home.

It wasn't always home, of course. It was never really *my* home, but it loomed large in our family's history. A little over two hundred years ago, a man — a middle-aged Mountain Creole man — packed up and moved his family from Tennessee to Kentucky to Texas. Somehow, the man's family — five of his children, twelve of his grandchildren — ended up moving back east to Kentucky. In the years since, nearly all of his descendants have wandered between Kentucky and Texas. It's a right of passage in our family — to go from the strip mine to the cattle ranch, or the other way around, and to try to make it back in one piece.

There are dozens of us cousins. But there are three of us girls — women — that are the same age: one in Alabama, one in Arkansas, and one in Kentucky. The one in Kentucky stayed closest to the family's elders, but she was miserable, and she didn't even try to hide it. She was envious of the other two — because in her mind, *Alabama* meant *beaches* and *Arkansas* meant *the eastern border of Texas*. She spent so much time visiting Arkansas that she'd nearly driven her tires bald. She could afford to stay a couple weeks here and there in Arkansas, but she couldn't afford new tires for that old Mazda. It was impossible to convince her to look at new tires *or* a new truck.

She wasn't annoying, not really, because she was generally pretty conscientious. She was stubborn, sure, but she was sensitive. She would sit and cry and tell us that they'd used limestone from in front of her house to build the prison that our cousins worked in, and where one of our cousins lived.

"Do you ever visit him?" Raina asked her. For once, Raina and I were visiting Alma in Kentucky. I'd arrived on Friday night, and Raina met up with us on Sunday morning. We decided to have coffee together, sitting by the water, watching the barges roll down the river.

"Nah, I don't do visits," Alma said. "But I ought to. He didn't molest anybody, which is a mark in his favor. But he killed a man, and ... well, at least he didn't kill a child."

Raina nodded. "What about your other cousin? Weren't you telling Parker here that you have another one in the pen?"

“Yeah, I’ve got another cousin — *had* one, anyway. Mom’s side of the family. He’s strung out on fentanyl or something awful, right? He’s in prison, too, but they put him in that minimum security joint.”

“The one in Fremont?”

“That one. Christmas rolls around, and he decides he’s gonna escape while he’s on a work detail or something. So he does. People do it all the time, but he leaves a day or two before Christmas. Horrible timing. Christ, you wouldn’t believe the mess. They’re hunting for him, tracking him through the woods with the dogs, and then—”

“Did they catch him?” Raina asked. She usually pretended to be disinterested, but she couldn’t help herself whenever it came to stories about criminal activity.

“I was gettin’ to that. I had my momentum and everything. Let me wind it back up again. The police were out combing the woods, some of *our* cousins were in on the search, and half the county actually locked their doors for once, because they were telling people he could be armed and dangerous. People were scared shitless. And then they found him — propped up right against a tree. He froze to death at the edge of the woods.”

Alma didn’t smoke, as far as we knew, but she pulled the kind of face that made you think of a menthol cigarette. It was impossible not to feel something cool and unsettling floating through your lungs.

“Let me tell you. After that all was over, the family didn’t have much more to complain about. I’m sure that was the first good night’s sleep his wife had in years.”

“Alma, you’re so soft when it comes to family things. Knowing that you can talk like that about your own cousin, it really says something about you.”

“What? That some of my cousins mean more to me than others?”
We sat there, watching the water, and didn’t say much else. We didn’t have to.

Trap Ease

There was only one thing we didn't like about Alma. The way she treated her boyfriend was atrocious. She didn't think of him as a boyfriend, but he absolutely saw her as his future wife. They were both confused, but I didn't see that as much of an excuse.

I asked her how and why they ended up together. She told me that she bumped into him about twelve years after they'd graduated. (It was actually thirteen years later, but she was too superstitious to tell me the exact number. That's one of Alma's biggest weaknesses — superstitions.) They were shopping at the same dollar store; they were both buying deodorant. Alma was also buying tampons, but she didn't really feel the need to hide them from him. She felt comfortable around him, unafraid, unashamed. She stood there with all of her stuff balanced on her hip, and didn't mind taking time to play catch up. They blocked the aisle for thirty minutes, cutting up and talking about high school memories.

"I don't remember you being so hot — so beautiful, I mean — back when we were in school," he'd said. He didn't ordinarily say the wrong thing like that, but he was already feeling flustered. She knew how to be charming, how to make a man feel funny — sometimes in a good way, sometimes in a bad way.

Alma was actually feeling raw that day, and she was loaded for bear — but instead of being dismissive, she thought she might give him one chance. Just one.

"I don't remember if I was hot or not, either," she said. "But I don't remember a lot about school. I tried to forget everything I didn't need to remember."

He laughed. They exchanged phone numbers. And the rest unfolded as it typically does, whenever two lonely people decide to settle for each other.

Mr. Sands — that was his name. He was a student when she was, though, and not a teacher. So it seemed weird that she would always call him Mr. Sands. Any time she mentioned him, it was *mister* this and *mister* that. I'm embarrassed to say that it took me two weeks to realize that she didn't want any of us to know his full name.

This wasn't because he was a bad guy. She just didn't want any of us to get too attached to him. The plan with Mr. Sands was to use him for his money, to date him for a little while, and then to dump him when she found someone "better." But then she

couldn't find anybody better. She only found out that she couldn't shake him. So she tolerated his presence, mostly because she pitied him.

He was still hot, she admitted, but he was a single dad. That limited his prospects, even though there were plenty of other single parents running around town. It just seemed like other people hadn't given him a chance, and Alma took it upon herself to take in a stray pet. I wondered why she was dating a single dad if she was wanting to date for *money*, but it was her choice. She said he had a decent job — but none of us knew what he did. She *really* didn't want anyone to get to know him. I don't think she thought anyone would steal him — it seems like she thought people in the family would start liking him more than they liked her.

At the same time, Alma was convinced that they were two arcs that had crossed at a crest and a trough — at thirty, her looks were improving and his were fading. This was because he spent a lot of time eating chicken nuggets with his daughter — that was Alma's theory, not mine.

But it felt fun. They were on a trapeze together, and she was about to let go of his hands, and she knew she wouldn't catch him. She knew she would let him fall. And it thrilled her — she was really looking forward to it. She could hardly wait; she could hardly hide the fact that she wanted to watch him fall right out from under her.

Raina

We are the great-great-great granddaughters of the Yellow Rose of Texas — if the Yellow Rose were a man. This great-grandfather of ours — the Mountain Creole man — was one-sixteenth Black. With each generation, the sliver of the pie got smaller, but we were still aware of percentages and fractions.

Raina hated blood quantum mathematics. She told a group of us — back when we were teenagers, back when we were just beginning to see how everything in life is inherently political — that the one-drop rule was bullshit. This wasn't because she wanted to hide her heritage, but because she knew there were people who would be cruel to someone who was "distantly" Black.

"You see those stories about how those Klansmen shoot themselves when they find out their granddaddy was Creole. Not Cajun, but *Creole*. I don't want to be judged by some racist ass just because of who my granddaddy was. But I also don't want to have to introduce myself as a percentage. It seems disrespectful on multiple fronts — it feels like a way of negating something. Like I'm being proud to be *part* something, but that I'm *relieved* to not be *completely* something. I just am what I am and I'm not what I'm not."

"What do you mean? *Completely* something?"

"I'm saying that some people make it seem like, *well, at least I'm a little exotic* or *I knew I had some flavor — this is why I like spicy food*! Please. The reason that some of us have 'that flavor' is because ... like ... the legacy of slavery. I don't know any other way to say it. It's sad. I'm not embarrassed. I'm just upset to think about a woman having been stolen. Mistreated. Abused."

Raina was generally talkative and opinionated — but on this, I understood where she was coming from. I agreed with her more often than not — especially on issues like this. And this was something she was extremely passionate about. I can't say I blame her. I was proud of our ancestors for having survived hardship — but I also felt pained at the thought of a woman being forced away from her family, forced to cross a dangerous ocean on an even more dangerous ship, forced into slavery in the so-called New World. This New World was full of old hurts — and the pain lasted for years, for centuries, for generations.

It made my stomach clench. Raina, though, she was more action-oriented than I could even dream of being. I mean, I was active — but where I hesitated, she would march bravely onward.

Raina was, by way of her mother *and* her father, an Accidental Creole. Her mother had a family tree full of Spaniards and French folks, and a father — well, her father was on our side. Between the French ancestors and our Congolese ancestors, and the fact that she'd spent her whole life in the South, she felt a great kinship with people from New Orleans and any person who grew up fully entrenched in the Louisiana Creole culture. But she never said it out loud — outside of our family and a few close friends — for fear of looking like a fraud.

While she hated the idea of blood quantum mathematics, Raina was deeply aware of the fact that she was (at least) 1/256th Black. And that was just what she was aware of — she knew that there was an entire world of things she knew nothing about. Raina was always the type of person who wanted to know the names of every bird, all the flowers, the different types of trees, and so on.

Go on and have fun naming rocks, I'd taunted her once, back when we were kids. *It's not a rock,* she'd said. *It's rugose coral. It's a fossil. That's its real name.*

It wasn't a matter of classification for her — it was a matter of recognition. She wanted to recognize everything and everyone. And so, in the interest of recognizing and acknowledging the ancestors she knew about, she felt like she needed to openly embrace this aspect of her background, even if she felt more than a little awkward.

And *this* left her feeling like she needed to be more active, feeling like she had to account for all the times one set of ancestors had harmed another set. In the spring of her senior year, Raina and one of her friends (a Spanish Creole girl, born in a town called New Iberia, later raised in Arkansas) tried to steal a replica Pinta when it docked somewhere along the Little River. They didn't really do anything besides untie it from a dock, but the Pinta people were furious, and the high school principal came down hard on them.

They both thought it was funny — and her friend told her it wasn't so bad, seeing as they were both not going to face charges for what they'd done. If anything, it was more like a senior prank. And they weren't messing with people — they were messing with property. Symbolic property, for crying out loud — the replica wasn't an artifact. It was just a flimsy symbol.

Raina also didn't care if it ruined her reputation in her hometown — although it didn't. If anything, she became more popular those last few weeks of high school, when people were able to put a face to a name from a funny story. But she didn't plan on staying in the area forever. She ended up moving an hour away — to Texarkana.

This thrilled Alma, who believed that if someone was playing a steel guitar in Texarkana, you'd be able to hear it in Paris. For her, this was closer than ever to getting back to our roots.

"Alma, that's the same town where they dragged a young Black man to death," Raina said. "I'm not spending *any* money out there. I won't even visit — so I'd never live there. Never ever."

"What about the people who actually do live there, though? A quarter of the people there aren't —"

"Alma. We aren't going to fight about this. You aren't going to change my mind. I know that maybe you want to meet our cousins, and that's fine. But I don't think we need to go and do anything performative —"

"So that incident with the Pinta? That *wasn't* performative?"

Before Alma had time to laugh, Raina was out of her chair. She grabbed Alma by the hair, pulling her across the floor, and then flipping her onto her stomach. She pinned her down with one knee.

"Want to give me a piggyback ride?"

"No," Alma squalled. "You know my back already hurts — don't sit on me, you cow."

'You're bigger than me, girl," Raina said.

"And you're stronger than me."

For Raina, this was enough. She stood up and let her go.

Outside Looking In

"I think that was it — all that I wanted to tell you," I said, when I was talking to Raina. She was the outspoken one, the one who always knew what to say — but she was also a great listener. I often treated her like a Mother Confessor. "I felt like everyone at work thought I was stupid. Just because I tried to help, and even though I *did* help. But I guess trying to help makes people think you're soft and silly."

"They probably judge people," Raina said. "But that's okay. We all judge people. I'm an excellent judge of character — I can always tell whether someone's on or off. You can't be on all the time — and if someone is on all the time, it's usually an act. Now, some people are *on* all the time. On drugs, I mean."

She elbowed me when she said this. She kept her face neutral, as if she'd believed I might have something else to confess.

"On drugs, my ass. I've never done drugs," I said. "But the drinking — that's a problem we share. I know I told y'all I was going to quit drinking so much, but I'm back in the saddle again. Every so often, I have to have something. But it's not like an addiction — not yet. It's more like a ... social crutch."

"Can't beat the company of Old Granddad." Raina drained her glass and — after looking sideways at me — decided not to pour another one.

Inside Out

"Used to, all it took was seeing other people get engaged," Alma said. She had called me just to complain. "That shit would make my stomach hurt. Now, I don't care. Actually, I start feeling sick when he talks about how nice it would be for us to live together. I always tell him that I'm not planning on living in Kentucky forever — that I'll be leaving for Texas before another year or two."

They were lying in bed together when she'd broached the topic.

"You see, I'm planning on going off somewhere. For a very long time, maybe."

"Prison?" Mr. Sands said. He was kidding. Maybe.

"No. Overseas."

"Texas isn't overseas."

"No, it's not. I'm going to go on a trip, first, before I plan on moving out there. A trip with a relative."

"Male or female?"

"Female. But it hardly matters — I already told you, it's a relative."

"I thought you might be trying to sneak something by me."

Alma was always sneaking something by him, but this insinuation made her knuckles whiten. She could tolerate spending a little more time with him — but her heart was already hundreds of miles away, in a rental house in Texas.

Treatment

"Hair of the dog is a kind of homeopathy," Raina said. "That's how I take it, anyway." "Is that advice you're giving, or advice you're taking?" I asked.

"Giving," she said. "I'm not drinking right now, if that's what you're implying. I'll be driving all day."

"No, no. We'll swap at the next rest stop."

"I'm the only one who drives this car." Alma was precious about her car — a white Mustang with a powder-blue interior. She would have been precious about a rented or dented Altima, but she also liked being in the driver's seat.

"Now, Parker, your job is to keep me entertained. Tell me that story you mentioned earlier. The one about that musician, you know, who sent his daughter to your college. The two of you were in the same sorority, right? Tell me all about them."

So I did. I told her everything.

"*That's* the American dream," Raina said. "Be like Elvis. Lift your parents out of poverty and have grandkids that are movie stars."

"My little isn't a movie star. She's working on her own album, though, so —"

"*Good grief*. But good for her."

"Yeah. It's a folk album, and —"

"Jesus. Can people who grew up in mansions be folk artists? They aren't even *folks* — they're too fancy to be folks." She laughed, and then her face hardened. "I'm serious."

"I didn't think you weren't."

"Listen. The other day, I told someone, *'It looks like a trailer park puked on your truck. All that chrome — and I can say that, because my cousin still lives in a trailer park.'* Well, we both laughed, but I knew that I shouldn't say something like that, Parker.

And the only reason I can even get away with saying something like that is because I'm not rich, either."

She paused, just to catch her breath, and started back up. "It made me feel meaner than I really am. I'm a pretty good person, despite my worst tendencies."

Raina waited a few minutes before starting back up again. "I told someone the other day, *No one wants you. A one-eyed dog wouldn't hump your leg.* And we're friends, you know, so I can write it off as just joking. But I don't like myself when I get ornery like that. Sometimes it feels like the older I get, the meaner I get. Do you feel that way, too?"

As we pulled back out on the highway, I turned to Raina.

"When we stop to take another bathroom break, let's switch drivers. I don't want you getting worn out."

She snorted. "*Bathroom break.* You're too classy to say *piss* — I already knew that. But I bet you can't even bring yourself to say pee."

"I can say pee."

"You're saying *pea*, like the green kind. I can hear it in your tone. If you were a chicken, you wouldn't be able to lay eggs after seeing — or feeling — that it all comes out of the same hole. But that's life. It all comes out of the same hole. Listen. I know you're classy, Dr. Morris, but you can let your hair down with me."

As she said this, she patted her head. Raina had thick Irish-dancer's-wig curls, big spirals spinning out in all directions. She'd teased me about my own limp curls, which weren't as tight, but were also pretty full. When we first got in the car, I told her that I needed new hair product recommendations, and she told me that she was always on a quest to try something different. She'd told me the one great disappointment in her haircare journey was the silk pillowcase, which she didn't think made a bit of difference. I told her that silk pillowcases always worked for me. And then she told me that we definitely had different curl types, and that she would probably just try wrapping her hair in the pillowcase next time.

I reached over and pinched the end of one of her curls. "Okay, then. If we're letting our hair down, then let's talk about Alma and her boyfriend."

“Which one?” She sighed. “The single dad? Man, I keep going back to this — who dates a single dad if they say they’re dating with money in mind? My hand to God, she’s trapping a man who’s already trapped. So the way I see it, they’re just playing a game of rock, paper, scissors. But rest assured, paper will eventually beat rock. What I’m trying to say is, the weaker one will win in the long run. It’ll all balance out, *I* think. So don’t you worry about her taking advantage of him.”

Raina fidgeted with the car’s paddle shifters, even though she didn’t need to shift gears at all. She just did stuff like that sometimes — stuff that nobody else would do. Anybody else would think she was irritated — and it’s true that Alma could irritate her — but it seemed like she was enjoying our gossip.

“I guess the road from Lamesa to Paris stays hot,” I said. “What with Alma starting to relocate out here. She’s glad to have cousins on both sides of the state, she says.”

“*Out here* — she knows better than to try to get me to make social calls in *either* of those places. I mean, other than us coming to visit her together. I can tolerate it if you’re with me. But you’re right. The road stays so hot that it might as well be burnt. And even if she were to die this second, the road would stay busy. She’ll be haunting Texas thirty or forty years after she’s gone.”

“Why stop there? Why not three hundred years from now?” I asked. “Do you really think Texas will be here then?”

“God willing. At least for Alma’s sake. She’ll haunt it even if it becomes the Great Republic of Cowlots and Pumpjacks.”

“Let me tell you something,” Raina said. “I used to think she was the weakest one of us. But she’s tougher than you think. She’s so tough she can digest corn.”

Ranch-Style Beans

For about a year, Raina had been looking for Dearbhla, a small weasel. She knew it wasn't the best thing to do, but she often tossed leftovers for the weasel. This was a special animal.

She was waiting for Dearbhla — *Dearbhla Monica Weasel,* to use her full name — to come back, and Raina figured she could trap her if she could just trick her into coming up to the porch. She wanted to catch that white weasel ever since she'd seen it crossing the highway across from her house. It was on an unseasonably warm afternoon, and she had half a mind that she was just imagining things. But if it really existed, she *would* trap it. Not "it" — *Dearbhla*.

Raina told me all about this. She had developed a quasi-emotional connection to the weasel, so she'd decided to name it. She knew she'd never name any children, so she assigned names to animals whenever she felt the urge to test out the sound of two words together. Sometimes, even if the names didn't match, they stuck — and so the weasel bore the weight of a rather unwieldy name. What did it matter, given that most weasels wouldn't answer to anything? If anything, it was a kindness. Recognition. Recognition of a kindred spirit — a wild, fretful thing.

Raina never planned on having kids with anybody. In her mind, there were *types* of guys in the area, and she was able to classify all of these types. There were the guys who didn't work, the guys who wore mustard-yellow gumboots down at the chicken plant, and the guys out on the barge who took fentanyl and never wore condoms — and none of these guys were of interest to her.

She'd had friends who'd worked out at the chicken plant, and the only ones who stayed cheerful were the ones who knew they'd be leaving. They knew they'd never need to catch or debone a chicken again — not if they could get on at the nursing home, the dollar store, the barge company. Everyone else at the plant was worn out or worn down — everyone except for the fresh-faced Amish kids. The only reason they didn't look worn out — yet — was because they were on Rumspringa *and* meth. In a few months, they'd be just as miserable as everyone else at the chicken plant. Raina avoided *all* of those men, because she didn't want to wade through the layers of mucky men and meth addicts, to try to find a diamond buried under all of the chicken shit.

The men on the barge were, generally speaking, even more unpleasant. It seems like most of them had two or three families who they were only pretending to support. Raina didn't want to be somebody's fourth wife. *Fourth wife* sounded just as unsettling as *Fourth Baptist Church*. *What had happened to all of the others?*

Raina couldn't stomach any of the local men. Not for settling down with, not even for spending the night with. If she did any dating, she did it out-of-town. It didn't stop other women from *buying local* — but she could never bring herself to sniff around those guys. Even going beyond that, she knew that naming a child wasn't really in her future. So she decided to use two "whimsical" baby names on her semi-mythical pet. She knew that, with a little love and work, she could catch — and befriend — Dearbhla Monica.

If anyone else told me about this, I would think they were half-ignorant. But I'd seen Raina catch groundhogs and possums. She also caught skunks, but that wasn't something she bragged about. I knew she had the energy and the know-how to capture just about any animal. Once she became interested in a project, she would see it to its conclusion or solution. But she was more concerned about setting reachable goals than trying to go out of her way to prove she was doing something important with her life.

That was why it mattered to her — she wanted to do something she *could* do, without worrying about whether she should concentrate on something more noteworthy.

"I don't have to prove that I'm relevant," Raina had said to me. "You all know that. I wouldn't want to live in a castle in Scotland, or in a mansion by the beach. I need something familiar, like a small house or a nice double-wide."

She never mentioned it much, but she'd grown up in a semi-hoard. Her mother bought tchotchkes and dinner sets from the local dollar stores. These plates crowded cabinets, spilled over onto the counters, and eventually had to be stacked up in the laundry room. They'd have to take plates off the washer every time they needed to use it. Eventually, Raina and her dad used some of the plates for target practice — and it was a relief to watch them splinter into shrapnel. They'd finally served a greater purpose. They'd finally been used.

Raina hated dollar stores, naturally. She preferred to shop online — and she only ever purchased something when she realized she would make full use of it. She'd look online for decor for her dream tiny home — a home even smaller than the place she'd been renting from some cousins. She bought a rug that looked like a Cheez-It. She bought a garbage can that looked like a can of soup, tin lid and all. She bought a second can-can,

which was decorated with a Ranch-Style Beans label. She also found an old DARE t-shirt and planned on picking off or making through the "kids off" part, so that it would say "DARE TO KEEP ___ ___ DRUGS."

Raina didn't just like controversial things; she didn't try to be eccentric. In fact, she was just like everyone else: she wanted to enjoy the things she enjoyed, even if those things seemed silly.

I always figured if Alma won the lottery, she'd immediately go out and buy new clothes, a new car, a boat, all sorts of pointless stuff. I can't say I wouldn't do the same thing. I like nice clothes. But Raina wouldn't buy anything expensive. If Raina won the lottery, she would use it as an excuse to keep being eccentric. She'd be the first one to tell you that people don't just tolerate eccentric rich people — they *worship* them. So no new stuff for her — other than getting a little more respect. And who wouldn't want that?

Outside of a few "unusual" pieces of decor that were mass produced — *so how unusual could they really be?* — Raina wasn't big on acquiring worldly possessions. She was really quite the minimalist. So long as things were arranged the way she liked them, she didn't care how much or how little she had.

When we were kids, the three of us were competitive — the two Valentine girls and the Morris girl, whose mother was a Valentine.

Raina was the most forceful, but Alma was probably more competitive. We would have four- leaf clover finding contests, and Raina usually won. She's always been more determined to not let something beat her. Raina was more determined in general — but Alma was more determined to win by any means necessary. Alma would start pulling up regular clovers, and then she'd start splitting the leaves in half, bisecting them into droopy blades.

"These have six leaves now," Alma would say, waving a little bouquet of clovers under our noses. "So I win."

At that point, Raina would snatch them out of her hand and rip them apart. "There — now there are twenty leaves. Just leaves, no stems. So it doesn't count. *I win*."

During our ride across Texas, I asked Raina about this. "Hell, I don't remember any of that. I don't know why any of us cared so much. If anything, a four-leaf clover is just a three-leaf clover that studied abroad. Too special for the rest of us."

She paused, and I knew what was coming.

“Didn’t you do a study abroad? A trip to Europe?”

“I did. Six months in Spain. I took some history classes there, and learned about Picasso and Franco. Humans create, humans destroy. It’s wonderful and terrible.”

“Damn. That’s partly my territory — you know that, though. I wish they’d let me have a shake at that. Spain. But I’m too old now.”

“You’re thirty-two.”

“But I’m not a student. The only studying abroad I did was studying *a broad.* And I didn’t do any studying. I was the broad the guy experimented on.”

“Uh-huh. Listen,” I said. “Have you ever thought about writing a book? It might help to get some of those thoughts out of your head.”

“*No.* No books for me. I don’t mind books, of course, but the actual writing is out of the question.” She laughed. “Of course, someday ... I might want to write a memoir. I might want to share some nasty secrets.”

I knew she had plenty of those. She was always so good about protecting herself, but she also took care to protect other people.

At the end of the day, Raina was looking out for herself — but someday, her white knight (or white weasel) would come along, and she'd try to protect him. Not to defend him when he did wrong, no. I figured she'd protect her precious weasel from the meanest wolves.

"I'm not a romantic," she'd told me. "But I do get sentimental. It's like The Stanley Brothers, that thing about love being mainly just memories. And that's me. I love the fleeting memory of a man more than the man himself."

I didn't believe this. Not entirely. I believed that she had enough memories for three memoirs. But I also knew she wanted the real thing, and that she was determined to grab it by the horns, the fur, or the collar.

Over Easy

"A book. I can't imagine writing a book," Raina said. "Especially a memoir. Every time I have a profound thought about something, I try to forget it instantly."

"Why?"

"Somebody else has probably said it before or said it better. But if it comes back to me, and keeps coming back to me, then I let it take up space in my mind. I keep it rolling around up there. But I still don't write it down. Now, you know, if I ever get a really good idea — a *really* good one — I'll try to write a song."

"Have you ever written a song before?"

"No," she said. "Well, yes. The one about the jet-ski."

"How does that one go?"

"Oh, it's just a little something I was working on one night. I decided I'd try to write something about a dirt road or a car on blocks. And then I came up with this: *My neighbor saved up to buy a boat, not a trailer / His old man, he must've been the jailer. / Everybody's got a big, black dog — a big, black dog, / and a jet ski in the front yard. / Man next door's got a gym in his garage, / two doors down's the Masonic Lodge / but look over there, over there / there's a jet ski up on blocks*."

"Shiiiit," I said. "We'll have to tell my little about you."

"Nuh-uh, no way, no," Raina said. "I forbid it."

"What if she could help you make some connections in the music scene? Wouldn't you like that?"

"Mmmmm," she pretended to ponder it. She pursed her lips and was quiet for twenty seconds, which was an eternity in Raina Time. "I'll think about it. I've gotta work on some other stuff, first."

I smiled. "I remember you working on poems and songs all the time when we were in high school. You did ... what was it? It was the one about the soap."

“Oh, sure,” she said. “*Boy, you’ve got me floating just like Ivory soap. / Love is nature’s strongest dope.* I did one about some scrambled eggs or fried eggs, too, but I obviously can’t remember exactly how it went. It might've even been about hog's brains. You know, brains and eggs.”

“That's suitably country, though. And palatable, for the average person,” I said. “There's the kind of person who wouldn't think the brains are actual brains. They'd think it's a euphemism. And they'd ignore that part and just focus on the eggs. Better to be writing about eggs than, say, tonsil stones or spar mines or woolly aphids.”

“What's that? That last one? Woolly aphids?”

“You know what I'm talking about. The little gnats covered in fluff.”

“Oh, yes. The cotton-candy flies. They don't help a garden, but I love to see 'em. You know, that's just part of living in Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas. You get used to all of these things and don't even think twice about the things that could hurt you. A woolly fly messing with the plants. A mean starling that sounds like a swing rocking back and forth — really soothing, until it makes a nest in the tree next to your car. And then you've got to wash the car every day. Oh, and baked beans. I always make too many, put them in the fridge, and by the time I remember I have leftovers, they have fur growing on them.”

“I hope your whole fridge doesn't look like that.”

“No,” Raina said. “It's just the baked beans. But you get what I'm talking about: all this stuff that looks good or tastes good or feels good, and then it ends up causing more problems down the line.”

“But that's just part of life.”

“Is it? Isn't there something else beyond that?”

“It's not about the stuff that happens beyond that,” I said. “It's about the good stuff that's happening before and during. That's the stuff that we're supposed to be enjoying.”

“Oh, the wise doctor has made her pronouncement. ‘Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened.’ That's what you're saying.”

I nodded. And I nodded some more, because I didn't have anything else to say. The next time I spoke again, I asked her to let me do the driving for a little while. I didn't care if we had to stop somewhere hot or humid — it was one of those days where the air above

the road was heavy and damp. But I didn't care about the thick air or the high heat. I just wanted to put myself in the driver's seat.

Foxface Rabbitfish

Before I decided to go into dermatology, I thought about going to veterinary school. I loved animals then, and I still do now. But the way I had a love for living animals, Raina and Alma had a greater passion for finding dead ones. They loved fossil-hunting; they'd haul coral and fish skeletons up from the lake and drop them off on our grandmother's front porch.

Raina, in particular, liked fossilized fish. She even had a book filled with illustrations of fossils, and she'd read out the names of the different fish — my favorite being the foxface rabbitfish. I didn't even know what one looked like, but I knew I liked the name. I loved a creative name, even if I didn't know what it represented. Raina, of course, was into the real thing — the meat and the bones.

She'd trace the outlines of their skeletons, and she'd marvel at how something that was dead was still with us, and perfectly preserved, at that. She wasn't *obsessed* with cult-y stuff, but she had a clear preference toward solving the mysteries of both life *and* death. Sometimes, this involved logic. At other times, she turned to more esoteric means. She found a pack of tarot cards at a Goodwill and shuffled through them every morning. One day, her (relatively religious) parents caught her with the cards. They said she could keep them if she'd learn one actual card game – and use them for non-tarot purposes. So she did. That was just like her, to approach things stubbornly.

She was always afraid of seeming like she was all talk and no action – probably because she talked so much.

There was a small part of myself that I could see reflected in her. We were adventurous, we were eccentric, but we were careful when it came to making our next move.

We shared some ancestors, of course, but we also had other things going on in our family circles. I felt like I owed some of my meanness and some of my perseverance to my Euro-Bajan ancestors, settlers who left the island after a couple of generations. The patriarch of the family became a Quaker, abandoned the island plantations, and *still* ended up settling in the South, after a few decades in Philadelphia. That's where they ultimately sowed their Quaker oats — all over the South. It was all more familiar — the heat, the humidity, the Atlantic Ocean, the pain.

Our shared ancestor, the Central African-descended Texan, ended up moving around for different reasons. I had thought his kids ended up back in Kentucky because they finally gave up on finding a welcoming place out west, but I'd come to realize they'd all journeyed back to be near family, near the Old Homeplace, because they were too impoverished to establish themselves elsewhere. And the financial factor, that was only one cost — nothing compared to losing support and family connections.

I was glad that my family tree had coalesced in one spot, right in the middle of the rivers of western Kentucky. I was amazed that people from the islands and people from the continents that bordered the eastern Atlantic had managed to come together *here*, to "make a better life" and help their descendants survive and to thrive. We had only just reached the "thriving" stage in the past generation or so, but I felt that they'd be glad to see that we didn't *have* to grow sorghum anymore. (One of our cousins still grew sorghum, but that was by choice. They also ran a small farm, with chickens and goats.)

It wasn't so much that an "outlaw" influence from Texas influenced my own family — not so much as it influenced Alma. In her case, she knew other folks who still lived in Texas. She had one branch of Texas outlaws on some other side of her family: folks who'd settled in far western Texas sometime around the 1940s or 1950s. But for me, the Redlegs and a grandparent who lived in the Keys were the ones who helped bring a more laid-back influence to my own life. We lived in a world with fewer boundaries, so I didn't mind playing outside all summer. Weaving clover into chains. Picking wild strawberries. Standing at the edge of the yard and watching the neighbors' pitbull puppies, feeding them tuna from a can. Windows were thrown open all spring and all summer, ants crawled on the counter by the sink, and going over to Grandma's meant sleeping with the screen door open all night.

I missed going back to that part of Kentucky — and I often revisited it in my memories. Usually right before falling asleep on a humid summer night, when I would pretend that I was back in that old wrought-iron bed, wiping crushed mosquitoes off my arms.

"I think the fella from Kentucky — Sands, right? I think he thinks she's got some guy out here. But she's just staying with her Lovelace cousins, as far as I know," Raina said. And then she laughed and laughed.

She'd finally given me a chance to drive, and after a quick nap, she was already ready to talk again. She mentioned this out of the blue, it seemed, but I could tell she thought she'd landed on something important. Some big important truth.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s funny. Valentine and Lovelace. Lovemore and Loveless, right? And she’s constantly battling for love. She loves being in love more than she loves the act of loving.”

“I ... I have a confession,” I said. “I was very much the same way. Just a few years ago.”

“*No*,” Raina said, half-surprised, half-amused. “What do you mean? Tell me.”

“Truth be told, I’m even worse than Alma. There was a guy I’d had a crush on from freshman year of college. He had gotten a divorce. That’s not unusual. But the way I found out was really bad. I was looking at obituaries and I saw his dad had died. And that’s when I noticed that his wife’s name wasn’t there. They didn’t have any other grandkids listed, either, besides his sister’s son. This was important to me — when I realized there weren’t any kids in his life, I decided he was fair game for me. So I called Nicole — she was from school — and she let me know that I was right. Divorced, no kids.”

“Wait a damn minute,” Raina said. “I have a lot of questions already, and most of them are gonna be about this man. But I have to stop you right here and ask why you did that? Why you called some girl and asked her? Is she related to him? And wouldn’t she have been suspicious? Like, why are you so interested in him?”

“No. It was really simple. She was, like, the class president or the class coordinator or whatever. She organizes class reunions. So I told her I wanted to send a condolence card to the family and I didn’t know what his wife’s name was, and did she know, and could she tell me, and — and then she cut me off and said, ‘Oh, baby, they’ve been divorced for a year and a half.’”

“I bet your ass was dancing,” Raina said. “I can see you right now. Oh, I *know* you were smiling so hard she could hear you!”

“Oh, no — I tried to be calm. And I did a good job, I think, because I asked if I needed to include any children, or just his name and maybe ... So I trailed off like that. I left it hanging. And she told me it was just him now. So I thanked her. I can’t even remember if I sent the card.”

Raina screamed. This was a vicarious delight for her.

“Ooooh, I wish Alma were here! I’m about to say *A-HA!* more times than her man Bob Wills ever did. You’re gonna think I’m a yes-woman, the way I’ll be hollering out *yessss*. Now that I think about it, you were probably hollering out some yesses, too. Oooh! So if you didn’t send a card, did you send something else? A picture, I mean. You know what kind of picture I’m talking about.”

“I didn’t. But I did use the unfortunate things that happened to him as motivation. For myself, I mean. I knew he was single, so I thought I might have a chance. We actually worked in the same building — he worked in the credit union across from our office. I knew he showed up early. So I would start showing up at work about five minutes before he did, so I could wait for him and just stroll on in around the same time.”

Raina nodded and nodded. She approved of a planned “chance” encounter.

“So,” I said, “I checked my makeup and my outfit first, always — the extra five minutes gave me time to do that. And the outfits! God, I like to try to look good, but every outfit I wore was with him in mind. I actually wondered whether he would notice my body or not. I’m not as bleeding-heart as you are, but if another man complimented me, I would’ve cringed. Now, if *he* noticed my body, if I could feel his eyes lingering, I know I would’ve melted on the spot.”

“So what *happened*?”

“Well, we started saying hello to each other in the morning, but that ... that was about it.” Raina was miffed. She snorted.

“Well,” I continued. “That was about it for four months. And then we started sleeping together.”

The shouting and whooping started, after I told her that. She must’ve whooped and hollered for a minute straight.

“Wow. You think you know somebody. I — I didn’t know you had it in you. To orchestrate something like that. *Damn*. I sure am proud of you.”

“But the reason I told you all of this is to say that I’m no better than she is. I’ve chased a man who I knew I liked, even before he had any feelings in return. And he was also divorced. He just wasn’t a dad.”

“I hope he was a daddy, though,” Raina said. “I bet he was fine. You and I have similar taste, so I know he was something.”

She paused, made a wistful little sigh, and then started up again. “You know, you and I are a lot alike. It’s just the memory, that’s what it is. That’s what draws us back in. I rarely fall in love with a new man — it’s the memory of a man I’ve always known. It’s just the memory of him. That’s what I’m really in love with. The idea and the memory, the way I can sugarcoat it when it's locked up in my mind.”

“Well,” I said, because I didn’t know what else to say. “I understand. All I meant by telling you all this is, I guess that we shouldn’t judge her.”

“Oh, man — if this family had to cast out the beams in our own eyes before going after the motes in each others’, we’d be having a caper tossing contest.”

“A caper or a caber?”

“Both. I’ll toss some little pods if I feel like it.”

A Dream I Had (When I Was A Passenger)

As we closed in on Los Ybanez, I fell asleep. I was in the passenger's seat again, so it didn't matter if I dozed off for a few minutes.

I was back home again. I wasn’t in Alabama, but back at my old home in Kentucky. I was cleaning the house, taking pictures off the wall, wiping dust and dead bugs off the back of each frame.

I felt guilty wiping up the dust, knowing that some of it was here when my grandparents were still alive.

Before I wake up again, I dream of a springtime field. The prettiest time of day at the prettiest time of year - the daffodils and the bluegill and the islands in the river and memories of love and being loved.

When I Wake Up, She Shares Her Song With Me

"I've figured it out now," Raina said. "It goes like this: *I drove four thousand miles, from the river to the desert twice – and this ain't my husband's truck. That man didn't even change the tires*."

She paused. I could tell she had more for me, but she wanted me to give her immediate feedback.

"Go on. I like it. But I know there's more."

"There is, yeah, but do me a favor and write this down for me. Here, here - I don't have a pen, and I don't need one, anyway. Take my phone, open the notes, and just start typing."

I was obedient. I wanted to do this properly, because I felt like I understood Raina's potential. We could both bullshit Alma all day long, but I would never bullshit Raina. She had talent.

"Does this song have a title?" I asked.

"'This Ain't My Husband's Truck' - that's the working title. But I like it. It's got 'husband' and 'truck,' and those are big grabs. Let's go!"

She talk-sang more and more lines, and I was her dutiful scribe. She also offered commentary.

"Now, now, for the bridge. I was thinking about adding this: 'I shed my skin, and you were right all along - there was a snake under there after all.' But I don't know. It probably sounds too much like Hole. I'm indifferent to a lot of country-rock, outside of outlaw stuff. I don't want to go full grunge. So how about this: 'I shed my skin to make this song. And you were right - I was a snake all along' - no? No. That's still not right. Let me think."

She pondered it. I chimed in with a minor suggestion. "Isn't he the snake?"

"Hmmm," she said. "I don't know if the husband is the snake. Matter of fact, I don't even think there is a husband. It's more about, like, you think I have a man, but I don't. I'm an independent woman, and I'll be a *mean* independent woman if the occasion

calls for it. So ... I still feel like someone's a bit of a snake. The person who's judging - maybe they're the snake. Anyway, I'll work on that part. Or work on another song, maybe, because I don't want to let that go. Oh, wow, Parker. This is a lot of fun. I'll be doing more of this. I will."

Years before, Raina shared a poem with me. She wrote it for some contest, if I remember right, and not for a class or a grade. This was the poem: *The land of the free is the land of the broke / and the land of the broken. / Broken-down car on cinder blocks in the backyard. / Broken-up houses after the hurricanes and tornadoes. / Broken bones after the rodeo. / Broken shackles, yes, but also / broken horses and / broken spirits, broken dreams / broken promises – and just plain broke / without a dollar in my pocket, with no money to burn / and no way to earn more.*

The way Raina wrote stuff like that, it impressed me. She could sear memories you didn't even know you'd had right into your brain. I didn't even know that I remembered her poem until just now ... but I did. She left a permanent impression. She was good.

The rest of the ride, she lobbed some half-pondered lyrics at me.

"You took me to Missouri, man, you really showed me. / You saw my smile — it met my cheeks and my eyes. I saw your body — you made me sigh. / I saw some loving, even though there were lies."

"I’m a shed patched up with the sheet metal leftover from the barn. / I’ve got rust on my sides — but I’ve only got you on my mind."

Raina couldn't do anything halfway. Somewhere, about a hundred miles from our destination, I knew that she'd make something out of all of the stray lines.

Fanfare

When we arrived at Alma's new place — it's her other cousins' place, but they'd decided to let her use it — she was already waiting for us. She was posing on the front porch, dressed up in something that looked like a Dallas Cowgirl's take on a Nudie suit.

"Well, how goes it? Was the drive just terrible? Or was it better than you'd expected? I don't mind a bit of scenery myself." Alma shouted all of this from her perch, but she hopped down the steps and ran over to the car.

"My God, Parker," she whispered. "It's good to see you. I saw Raina just a couple of months ago. But you're back east in Alabama and —″

"It's funny," I said. "You moved out here right when I was thinking about moving back to Kentucky."

"To *Kentucky*?"

She was flummoxed. Even Raina didn't know about this, but Raina has always been more even-keeled than either one of us. I looked at Raina and, without so much as a twitch or a shrug, she turned to Alma and nodded. And there we stood — three cousins and a Mustang.

"Well, I'll be," Alma said. "Listen, why don't you all come on up into the house. It's mighty nice, I think."

“It looks lovely to me,” I said. “I can’t wait to see the inside.”

“We just saw the proverbial miles and miles of Texas — six and a half hours’ worth of sweat and tears,” Raina said. “So I’m ready to see the innards, too, if you don't mind giving us a tour. Maybe wipe my face with a cold rag, if that’s alright? And have a glass of cold water, if your ice maker works.”

We went inside, following Raina’s pronouncements, and we had a light dinner together. (It was a light dinner, because Alma wasn’t used to cooking for three.) We used our tiring trip as an excuse to focus on the food instead of on a deep conversation. Besides, we had plans to attend the county fair later that night, so I imagined we'd catch

up with Alma while we were in the stands watching mutton busting, or something like that.

"Raina, you still like rides?"

"Love 'em."

"Well, there's something for everyone down there. Stuff where the bottom drops out, those swinging gondola things, all sorts of it."

"I want to see the rodeo," Raina said. "I think there's a whole lot of animal cruelty that goes on at these rodeos, but I still want to see what's going on. It's dangerous. But I can't look away."

I suddenly felt as if they were speaking in metaphors — speaking about a particular person. Rides, cruelty, danger. I realized there was some stuff they hadn't clued me in on. So I took the bait and I bit down.

"Who is he?"

"Who do you mean?" Alma asked, in a strained attempt at nonchalance.

"Who are you seeing down here? Or out here, or over here, or whatever. Who is he?"

"It ... it just so happens that we're not very far from Austin. I was at an event, really, and I met this nice gentleman who has a very important job in Austin."

"Horseshit," I said. "I know that's gotta be two or three hours away." Raina immediately held up her hand, waving it inches from my eyes. *Five*.

"Five hours," I hooted. "Don't tell me he's some intern for a senator or some..." I trailed off. I already knew — somewhere, in the pit of my stomach, I knew she was working on a bigger fish than a small fry.

"He's a state senator."

"Jesus Christ." This came from Raina, not from me. I could tell that she already knew some of what we were hearing, but that it still disgusted her. Disappointed, but not surprised. Not surprised, but still upset. "A politician. She'll be after a murderer next."

"You don't have to say it like that," Alma said. She smiled, but it was a tight one.

"I'll say what I want to say. I can speak for myself. And I don't think it's a good move. What else are we supposed to make of it? And what about Mr. Sands? Is he just ... just stranded on the side of the road now? Did you glance in the rearview mirror before you drove away?"

"I'll tell you more, later on. But we're ... we're taking things slowly, and keeping things private. I know how to keep a secret, you know. So we're minding our own business and taking it slow."

"And he lets you leave the house dressed like that?"

"If I'm going to the fair? Then ... yes, of course. It's only natural to want to have some fun, girls." At that, she got up, and she skipped over to a guy selling cotton candy.

"Corndog, Raina? Or maybe you'd like some funnel cake?" I wanted to change the topic. I was also working on some funnel cake, but after eating a few strips, I realized I was in over my head. "I'll share."

“I bet he’s a Libertarian, if he isn’t a Republican," Raina said. I could tell she felt a little guilty for jumping right in, just by the twitch of her lips. I wasn't surprised or offended when she sighed, grabbed my plate, and then suddenly pushed it back toward me. "Senator Sex, that’s what I’m calling him. No. No. Thinking about it makes my stomach hurt. And I don't need any fair food, anyway. I'm full. Besides, you know what I really want to talk about. I can’t quit thinking about that man. She has a picture of him on her phone. He’s standing in front of a big dually. It’s huge, but it’s clean. So I doubt it’s a farm truck. It’s all some performative bullshit. He’s too clean cut. Gives off a frightening vibe. Too squeaky clean — like they’ve *just* scrubbed the blood and guts off him. You just know the people in his district wouldn’t elect a Democrat.”

“But *you’re* not even a Democrat. You’re an extreme left-leaning —”

“So what?” Raina said. “Who else is going to get stuff done here in Texas? He’s bound to be one of those three. I bet he's a “No Labels” Conservative. Jesus. You just know he isn’t a Democrat.”

“He could be.”

“Who out here would vote for him?”

I pulled up a senate district map on my phone. “Look — oh, that's just a piece of hair. Okay. Look there, in southern Texas. And look at Houston. Look at that whole part of the state. Mexican Americans would vote for him, probably.”

Raina fixed me with a violent stare. I realized she objected to my speaking so broadly about a group of people.

“Well, possibly. Some would, some wouldn't,” I said. “But it can't be that he's ... *you know*. Surely she wouldn't just ... I …”

I couldn't think of anything else to say. We both knew that Alma was capable of doing just about anything.

Alma could hold someone in contempt for years. After any slight, perceived or real, she fully committed to judging them harshly for all the other things they'd done. Raina had grudges, but Alma just had harsh memories. She wouldn't act out in cruelty, not really. But she wouldn't be quick to forgive you, to be kind, or to be sympathetic.

I found this out one day when we were talking about Rachel Dycus. Rachel was a local celebrity of sorts — local to our corner of Kentucky. She was a showrunner and a TV writer. I didn't know the first thing about writing for TV, and I still don't, but everyone knew about Rachel. She'd made something called a limited-run web series, or web serial, or something like that. It was only supposed to be a few episodes long. It was about a small resort town — and a quarry town, with gravel pits near the lake. The town was called Berry's Ferry. Both the town and the show had the same name. And the show was much buzzed about — to the point that it became a surprise hit.

Berry's Ferry — the show, not the town — was mostly about these three teenagers who were coming of age between 2007 and 2011. Every episode was supposed to represent a significant moment from each year. Getting a driver's license, trying to get ready for college, spending the summer trying to have fun in between summer-job shifts — all of the typical stuff you'd see on a coming-of-age television show. But *Berry's Ferry* was a bit different. It was still pretty quotidian, but there were things about the show that were different.

The three main characters lived in a quasi-fictional town called Berry's Ferry. (There's a real place called Berry Ferry, with no possessive apostrophe, but I'll get back to that.) Berry's Ferry was the "lesser" resort town in the area; Cornflower was the fancier

town just up the lake. Same lake, by the way — but Cornflower had fancier amenities and facilities. Cornflower had a country club; Berry's Ferry had the Fur-N-Feather Inn. This hunting lodge, which was basically a twelve-room motel with a bean-shaped swimming pool, was owned and operated by one of the main character's families. (I'll get back to that, too. For now, I'll just mention that the Fur-N-Feather was featured prominently throughout the show.)

People in Cornflower may've been better off financially than their peers in Berry's Ferry, but all their wealth couldn't have spared them the misfortune of being located in the same exact county. This meant that the kids who lived in both towns — each with a population of around 2,000 — had to attend the same high school. The county was so small that it only had one school district. Hell, the county was so small it only had one working stoplight. The rest of the streets just had sun-bleached stop signs — signs that wouldn't be replaced unless somebody stole them, which wasn't unheard of. Lots of high school kids stole road signs to decorate their bedrooms. It was free — as long as you didn't get caught.

The people in the area, for the most part, had regular jobs: fixing outboards on old boats, serving at local restaurants or the nearby state park, or doing something over at the quarry. These were people who knew how to winterize a trailer and wrap a pontoon, people who knew how to gut a fish, people who knew the difference between #8 and #11 gravel. This show was relatable for all the folks who grew up in backwoods areas, where the algae- covered rocks at the lakeside beach felt more familiar than the soft-but-distant sands of Myrtle Beach and Gulf Shores. Houses in the area had torn umbrellas on their back patios, old cars that said *Datsun* instead of *Nissan*, and everybody either had a family member lodging or working in the state prison. I could relate to all of this. For people from the Valentine family, as a whole, this lifestyle was very familiar. So I wanted to watch the show.

Going in, I assumed the show would be a typical romantic comedy-type sitcom — rich boy meets poor girl, poor boy meets rich girl, something like that. But it didn't quite go that way. Two of the main characters were dating characters who lived in Cornflower, and the third one had another best friend whose family owned the Camwell Estate, the biggest wedding venue in the area. (Weddings, by the way, were a huge source of income for the folks in the area. Hunting trips. Weddings. Spa visits. "Rustic" summer vacations. All of the typical resort town stuff.)

Remi — named after the Remington rifle, of course, because her parents are avid hunters — was arguably *the* main character of the show, and her friendship with (wealthy,

pretty) Courtney Jay Camwell was one of the biggest draws of the show: that a rich girl and a poor girl could see each other as genuine friends. Courtney Jay was probably the fourth main- ish character, but the show really revolved around Remi, Annie Beth, and Georgia. They were three funny best friends. And that was enough.

The first episode, which I watched rather expectantly, was called *In These Days of Evil Presidentes.* It was set during 2007. I honestly thought it might be a political statement, you know, about the last gasps of the Bush era. But I found myself fully sucked in by the joke, and by the familiarity of the show.

It started with a voice over. It was Annie Beth, I think, and she said something like, *"Karl Marx once said that farmers needed to pack it in and leave the countryside for the cities, so that they could join the other workers. And it made sense to me. See, I've lived here all my life, and everyone I know lives like they're poor-ish, but wants to pretend to be rich. Isn't that nuts?"*

That leads into a scene where all three main characters are being chewed out in the principal's office. They've been called up to take random drug tests, because all three of them are student-athletes. (It's later revealed that one of them is a golfer and that the other two play chess and bowling. Not because they really want to, but because students could join any athletic team as an alternative to PE.) None of the girls will do it. One of them confesses that she peed about ten minutes before the drug test, and the others admit the same thing. The principal temporarily suspends them, and tells them they can come back to school in two days, where they will have another chance to pass the drug screening.

After being suspended, the girls walk out to the parking lot, get in Georgia's car, and head back to their little hometown. The viewer gets a good glimpse at both Cornflower and Berry's Ferry, and notes the differences between the two towns. We also hear the conversation the girls have on their car ride. Two of them admit that they were telling the truth about having gone to the bathroom right before the test, which was just their rotten luck; the third one admits that she knew she would fail if she had to take it that day, because she'd started smoking weed again. This is the girl who's the star of the chess team, which is supposed to be funny, I guess.

The girls then talk about how they want to spend the upcoming summer. One of them knows someone who's going to Coachella. This friend or cousin or neighbor is going to see the Arctic Monkeys. This was an inspired name-drop, by the way. The viewers will realize that these girls are actually sort of cool if they were listening to the Arctic Monkeys back in their *Favourite Worst Nightmare* era.

Twenty minutes later, the episode wraps up with one of the girls winning a radio contest. The grand prize? Four tickets to Bonnaroo. It's only a couple hours down the road, so the girls are excited. Most of them, anyway. Georgia complains about this, because (to her, and to lots of other people, probably) Bonnaroo is no substitute for Coachella.

"And who's going to be headlining? God, it's gonna be something miserable and depressing. Like The White Stripes."

The very next scene — which is also the very last scene — shows the girls in the throng of people at the headline event. And they're all singing along to We're Going To Be Friends. Now, I don't know much about performance rights, but I know they couldn't afford the rights to use much of that song. Basically, the band comes onstage, and then we see close up shots of the girls in the crowd. The girls were miming or mouthing the words, as if they were singing along, while a voice over offered some context for the scene.

It was Georgia speaking. She said, "We didn't know it then, but fifteen years later, we would laugh about how we had the chance to see The White Stripes before they disbanded. We slept under the same stars Lily Allen, even though we always sleep under the same — look, we were in the same town, alright? And it was cool. *We* were cool."

That was it. That's how the first episode ended. And people loved it — the episode and the show. But I knew one person who didn't like everything about *Berry's Ferry.*

"Have you seen that show about Berry Ferry?" Alma had asked me. We were talking on the phone about something else, but I could tell she had something to say about ... something. "It's really about the town — like, it's *really* about people around here. The Kountry Kitchen, you know, that's a real place. And the Fur—"

"Didn't they film in and around town? Did you see any camera crews?"

"Yeah, I saw them filming some outdoor scenes up around the lake. But I didn't even see any of the actors. I just thought they were from the college, filming a nature documentary for a school project, doing stuff like that. Anyway, I feel like I know the characters — no. I don't mean in a good way. I feel like Rachel Dycus made a show about real-life people and just swapped out the names. Didn't even bother changing the stories."

"Who? Which people?" "Annie Beth and her mother." "Do tell."

”Oh, I will. All those hints about alcoholism weren’t a joke, even though she wrote the show that way. That was some serious shit, all those DUIs. You know I hate a drunk driver. But I’m also pretty mad about the part she stole from me. Let me tell you about *that*.”

“What?”

“She stole an entire conversation we had in 2012 and put it in her show. Watch the 2011 episode. I can tell you from memory what we said, and you can compare it to her stuff. It was me and Maggie Oaks talking in homeroom. Maggie said, *I was putting together another outfit that I saw on Polyvore. I have everything in my closet — the brown boots and the red tights. But there’s one thing I still need.* I think Rachel Dycus used those exact words. But anyway. I asked Maggie what she needed. She said something about a feather, and I asked her about it, and she said she needed a red and blue and brown feather. Those were the exact colors they mentioned on the show.”

“... okay.”

“No, but listen. It’s not even the effin’ colors being the same. I could get over that. It’s this next part. Annie Beth and Georgia are talking in that scene, right? Well, in real life, Maggie and I were going on about the feather. I said, *Oh yeah, I’ve heard about those feather extensions. Julian Casablancas and Selena Gomez wear ‘em.* And then she said, *Wouldn’t you like to get one? We can go to my mom’s friend’s salon together.* And I said, *Hell no! I won’t do it, I just won’t. I’d much rather have some hair tinsel. I’m not putting anything that was on a bird’s ass on my head!* I thought that sounded familiar, because it was familiar. Those were the same words that came out of my own mouth.”

I could tell she had more ammunition, so I let her keep going.

“Maggie said to me, *If you have a real feather in, like, how do you wash it? Can you wash it? I’m so confused. What if it comes out?* And I said, *They make clip-ons. With plastic feathers. That way, we wouldn’t have to worry about the bird-ass problem.* That’s exactly how I said it, and that’s *exactly* what’s on her little show.”

“Maybe she’s just inspired by —”

“Inspired, *my ass*. It makes me wonder if she just walked around our high school with her Voice Memos open, recording everyone’s conversations.” Alma sighed. “I had to quit watching all of it after I saw that scene, because it just made me furious. Like, if I’m

going to contribute that much material to your show, then you'd better give me some credit. It just makes me mad — I wonder how much of that show is stolen material."

"It's a good show. And it's relatable. But now that I know she had dozens of unpaid writers, then ... well, I don't know."

"It's not that she's taking real things and putting a twist on 'em. It's the fact that she took exact conversations and put them on her show. Brazen bitch."

"Is that the only thing she stole from you?"

"From me? Probably. From my friends? No. Annie Beth is obviously Kimmy Jefferson. One of my real-life good friends. Her mom's brother is the one who runs the hunting lodge. And she took their family stories and ran with them. Sheeeesh. It's a wonder she even bothered changing the names."

"Why doesn't someone sue her?"

"Ahhh, they aren't gonna do that." Alma laughed, but she didn't sound amused. "It wouldn't be a good move. Ever since that show came out, more and more people have been coming to town. It draws tourists. It's good for the local economy. But listen. If I ever see Rachel Dycus in person again, I'm punching her in her face. Right in her face! Right in between those over- drawn eyebrows."

"I'm not saying you're overreacting. Maybe you aren't. But when I was in high school, I wrote this poem about a plane crash that happened in the area."

"Patsy Cline."

"What? No, not Patsy Cline. That was down in Tennessee. I'm talking about this plane that crashed just outside of town. To this day, they don't know if it was intentional or not. The wife and husband were on the plane together. He was flying, and they say she yanked the controls or whatever they're called. And then the plane crashed. That much is true. But what was going on there? Was he cheating or something? Did she have some sort of trauma? Why would someone do that? Or was it just an accident? I have no idea. But I wrote a whole poem about it, about *not knowing how Icarus felt until we were both falling together*. Something like that. Even though I knew people would know who I was writing about."

“Hey. That’s nice. Actually, no, it isn’t. People died in that one, so it’s not so nice after all. Your poem was probably a nice little memorial.”

“I tried.”

“Well. I’m trying to say that it just isn’t the same. What she did to some of these people, telling their stories and not even changing a word. And now that I think about it, it makes me ... I’m just ... I’m so mad that I’m losing it! I *do* remember another thing that she stole from me. From me and Kelsey Garland. It’s one of the jokes from the second episode.”

“Okay.”

“It went like this. Kelsey and I would just be talking. And I would say, ‘What are you doing this weekend?’ And Kelsey would go, ‘I’ll probably go to church.’ And I would say, ‘Both days?’ And she would say, ‘Nah, just Sunday morning. You should come with me!’ And I would say, ‘Ooh, where do you go? Should I bring my guitar?’ This was funny to me, because I can’t play a damn thing. But anyway. Kelsey would say, ‘Ah, no, you can’t! You can’t bring any instruments to the Church of Christ!’ And then I would say, ‘Well, what are they gonna do? Kick me out for being the best musician at the Church of Christ? I’d like to see what they’d do if I called myself the best guitarist in the whole church. They couldn’t prove me wrong! Not with everyone watching!’ And then Kelsey would say, ‘It’s an easy win. Like challenging a Baptist to a drinking contest — you know they’d win, but they can’t do a thing with everyone watching!’”

“So you both made fun of Baptists and Church of Christ folks in front of a room of Baptists and Church of Christ folks? Remind me what *our* great-grandmother was again?”

“She was a Campbellite. But she converted over from Methodism. We went from being Methodists to Campbellites to Capitalists, worshippers of the purse and the almighty dollar. A couple of big lapses in judgment there.”

“Dear Lord — you shouldn’t be saying that.”

“What? Worshippers of the purse?” she asked.

“No. *Campbellite*. I think that’s sort of cruel. But you really went there, didn’t you?”

“Hell. If I’m talking about Campbellites, I’m talking about Campbellites. Not Glen Campbell fans, either. I’m talking about all of the people who judged our family just for existing and — well, *anyway*. I’m willing to shrug it all off. It’s just something to laugh about. And most of the people would just laugh. It was just some fun. Even the teachers would laugh.”

She paused, tittered a bit, and then launched into another story.

“We’d come up with all these preposterous things. A Fifth Baptist Church, you know, things like that. That you could probably have a drinking contest there, but then they’d be setting up a tent in the tobacco patch across the road. The Sixth Baptist Church, then. And most people knew it was just silly. A little mean, but silly. I promise — I *promise* that most people laughed, because we were all part of those groups. We weren't punching down, right? Just punching over. Well, that bitch Rachel filed the serial numbers off of our jokes. She polished them up, yeah, but we were the ones who came up with this stuff. And she put it in the second episode, when they go to that church basement birthday party.”

“I remember that part. Where they find the booze in the basement.”

“I’m fuming mad. Just talking about all this makes me want to hunt her down and make her apologize. If you see Rachel Dycus before I do, tell her that she owes Alma Valentine a big paycheck! I’m her best writer!”

Something Else

Alma didn't tell me until later that Georgia — the most smart-mouthed and defiant *Berry's Ferry* character, the most mature of the three best friends — was almost entirely based on Bren Daniels.

Bren. I remembered her well. Raina and Bren — short for Brenda, named after her late grandmother — would hang out every summer. In the summertime, our whole family would reconvene. Sometimes, our visits would overlap for days. Sometimes, we'd be together for weeks or even months. But Raina usually spent time with people outside of our family circle, and Bren was her favorite person in town.

They were both sort of ... above it all. They had read *Ghost World*, but they'd never seen the movie. That sort of thing. They were both always trying to cut to the quick of things, but also to fly a little higher than all the other birds. Not out of a commitment to excellence, or purity, or intellectualism — but because they both thought there was something greater out there, something that would help them make sense of everything right and everything wrong. And then they discovered *The Stranger*.

The summer that they were both sixteen — the summer that Alma and I were both fifteen, about to turn sixteen — Raina came back to Kentucky, as was customary for her, and she and Bren talked about philosophy. Later, she told me, there was so much of it that she didn't understand. But Bren did. Bren understood just about everything, and she had the patience to explain it all.

They did everything that summer. They watched a lot of Blaxploitation films on Turner Classic Movies' late-night lineup. They also watched intense Swedish films, where witches levitated over their beds after having sex with awkward mortal men. They read the aforementioned philosophy books, and they read dollar-store romance novels they found at someone's Meemaw's house. They made homemade ice cream and slept under the stars.

Two years later, Bren overdosed. Around that time, that was when I suspected Raina might've been in love with Bren. When we spent time together a couple of years later, we stopped by the cemetery to put flowers on all of the Valentine graves.

“Wait, wait, we can’t leave before I give her *these*,” Raina said. She went over to the trunk of her car and pulled out a gorgeous red and orange bouquet. They were plastic flowers, of course, but the spray was huge.

“Now, you’re probably wondering how I did it — I took three of them, cut the stems, and rearranged ‘em. I hot-glued it back together, and this is her bouquet. This is what she would’ve liked.”

She placed the flowers in the little metal vase, dusted some dried yellow grass off the base of the headstone, and addressed the stone directly. “I’m getting things ready for your birthday, because I know it’s still hard for your mama. I miss you. We ... I just miss you so much.”

As we walked away, back to the car, I had to ask her. I just had to do it. I asked her if she'd loved her as more than a friend.

“No,” she told me. “Of course, I was a little bit in love with her brother Andy. He was so sexy. I mean, he still is. But he played baseball *and* basketball. The build on him, *my God*. I wish he'd paid attention to me. Mmm, but he’s married now. Happy wife, I bet. And he was so nice, too. ‘He’s a good man, Savannah’ — no, but he really is.”

She laughed — a genuine Raina laugh. And then she turned back to me, grabbed me by the elbow, and then looped my arm around her waist. I realized she wanted a hug, and so I pulled her around to face me. I knew she didn’t want to cry, but she wanted me to give her comfort. Not permission to break down, but real comfort.

“But ... you know how it is,” Raina said, slowly. It was like she believed the words, but like she felt guilty for saying them. “I really felt like she was my sister. You would understand, because you have a sister. But I don’t have anybody. I had her, but ... now I’m back to not having anybody.”

She started sobbing. I held her, and there we stood, halfway between the headstones and the cars. Halfway between the world of the dead and the living dead. And I didn’t know what to do, so I kept holding her. And she kept saying something, but I just couldn’t understand her. So I held her, and I told her that she was a good friend. Such a good friend.

Later on, I realized what she was saying. “*I wish I could’ve stopped her. I wish I could’ve stopped her.”*

But she and Raina were such forceful people. Raina was bold in a still-waters-run-deep way. She had the capacity to surprise, and she was well aware of it. Bren was the same way.

Bren had surprised even Raina when she'd died. But Raina still felt like she could've done something . If she'd just been around to say the right thing ... but life is unscripted. Lives aren't saved by cool quips or one-liners.

Alma told me never to mention the show around Raina, even if I enjoyed an episode. The month that the last episode was released, she made a point of asking Raina if she'd ever seen any of Berry's Ferry.

"Why would I watch that?"

"Well, I mean — I didn't think you had. I thought maybe you'd think it was hard to see someone so much like..."

She waited. She didn't want to say Bren's name.

"I don't have to watch *Berry's Ferry*," she said. "I've already seen that place. I've known it all."

The Lake

Kentucky was home. Texas was more of a vacation home. Kentucky came first, then Texas, then Kentucky again — and that was back in the 1800s, the first time our family tried to get away from it all.

But they came back — back to the burley tobacco and the limestone quarry and the soft, curling rivers. Back to the lake that smelled like mud and dead catfish. Back to the barges and the flooded corn fields and the tomato plants that needed constant succoring. Back to the mosquitoes and fuzzy aphids and all the little critters I mentioned earlier. Even the weasels. Even the water moccasins. Kentucky was home.

From there, over the next two hundred years, the family spun out in different directions. Kentucky was the center of our solar system — the scalding-hot sun. Three planets orbited Kentucky — Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas. And then the ones who landed in Tennessee went down to Alabama, and the ones in Arkansas teleported down to Texas. At this rate, we're all gonna end up in Texas.

But it's just as likely that we might all wind up back in Kentucky. As I'd mentioned to both Raina and Alma, I was thinking about relocating to Kentucky permanently. Raina was surprisingly thrilled.

"I wouldn't have moved down to Paris if I'd known you were looking at a lake house in Kentucky," she said. She put a biscuit on my plate. We'd started eating breakfast over an hour ago, but we were still planted at the kitchen table. We were waiting for Alma. "Is it right on the water? Shit — I don't need this Texas heat. I'm ready to get back to livin' like grandma did. I just need the banjo, the porch overlooking the river, a little flyswatter —"

"Humidity is a problem there," I said. "And it's only getting worse. Besides, I didn't know you were so taken with Kentucky."

"Oh, please — it's not so bad with the breeze coming off the water. You know that. And I don't have anything against the place. I have happy memories and sad memories there, but the happy ones are the ones that press down on my heart. In a good way, of course. Kentucky and north-central Arkansas — those places are home for me. Texas is

alright, but it's where we Valentines come to figure things out before heading back home."

She stole a glance out the door, out at the front porch, where Alma had been sitting for over an hour. She was on the phone with The Politician. And just as Raina had suspected, he was one of those fellows who called himself an "Independent free thinker" — though he wanted to mind everyone else's business. Right now, he was probably telling Alma what she could and couldn't do. But we didn't want to get involved — not right then, anyway.

"I don't know," Raina said. "Maybe Alma will find her place here. I just hope she breaks it off with him before he does something bad to her. Before he has his people dump her in a reservoir or something. It ... it wouldn't surprise me if she never comes back to Kentucky, not even to visit. Which is a shame, considering she lived there the longest. In my mind, it's her home, too."

We sat in silence for a moment. When I spoke, I changed the topic — just slightly. I pointed over at Alma and the porch.

"Back in the day, I would see older people sitting on the porch at four in the afternoon. I would think about how lazy they looked. And then when I turned 25, or thereabouts, I realized that that's all some of them have the energy to do. Just to sit with their head in their hands."

"I've felt tired like that," Raina said. "An all-over need for rest — the flesh and the blood and the bones, the body and the spirit. I've needed that rest. And I don't know if I could get it in Paris. I sure as hell couldn't get it out here, with all the ranch land. It's too vast and there's too much work. In Kentucky, I mean, there's work to do, too. Lots of work. And it doesn't always get done, but it waits. It's there the next day. And you don't have to feed it."

"You do, though," I said. "Think about the crops and the cattle."

"But *I* wouldn't be doing that. Not knocking it, sure — but someone else would be doing that sort of work. I'd work at one of the state parks or the lake resorts during the week, and then I'd write songs on the weekends. I'd drive down to Nashville once a month. I wouldn't wear myself out."

She paused. She nodded to herself — strictly to herself, as if she needed her approval more than mine.

“Yeah — I think we’d both have an easier time in Kentucky. I could rest, even in the shadow of the prison and the coal barges. Texas is a good place to get worn out. Kentucky is a good place to try to pull yourself back together again.”

I Already Knew

Even then, on that casual visit to Texas, I could see that they were both aiming at bigger things. Alma was rapidly failing upwards — though I admit that it took me a while to realize that all of her behavior was almost entirely calculated, right down to when she checked the mail, or which day she did her laundry. Luck was only part of her success.

With Raina, the hardest working of us cousins, hard work *and* luck were part of the equation. She spent a lot of time writing, and a lot of time revising her existing work, but she'd finally warmed to the idea of me getting her in touch with Laura Beth. They realized it would be a good move for both of them — the eager performer and the throw-it-all-in songwriter.

"Okay, I think I've got something here. 'Nehi To A Grasshopper' — like the drink. Now, this song is a lot like the stuff Shel Silverstein did for Loretta Lynn. So if it's a little too hokey — well, she'll tell me. In the meantime, she's going to listen to the one about the truck. It's completely ready now. I'm proud of that one."

"What about the one with the jet ski up on blocks? I like that one."

"She knows about that one, but I told her there were some bits that I want to change or rearrange. She told me she'll listen to both versions and then we'll talk about it," she said, with a hint of a smile. "You know, when we first started talking about doing this, I didn't think I'd want to work with her. But she's being remarkably accommodating."

Raina had told me that she didn't want to be taken advantage of, but after finding out how honest Laura Beth was — and how much money her dad was willing to throw into her music career — Raina realized she had little to lose and everything to gain.

"If they don't think it's worth using, then they're not going to try to steal it and give it to someone else. Because if it's dogshit, then it's worthless to them. But if they can use it, they're going to try to do something with it. And give me credit for it, of course. I told her I'd recorded our first Zoom meeting, just in case she tried to steal my words. I told her I didn't care if she backed out of any of it, but that if she stole my shit, I'd really give her hell."

"And you told her about Alma and *Quarry Girls*?"

We'd taken to calling it *Quarry Girls*, like *Derry Girls*, because the Berry's Ferry Quarry was featured in a couple of the episodes. This also kept Alma from getting too worked up about that rotten business.

"You know it. I told her that it's a wonder she doesn't fly out to L.A. and strangle her, the way she talks about her. And then I said, 'Sorry, am I allowed to talk about this stuff with celebrities?' And she said, 'How the hell would I know? I'm a celebrity's *daughter*.' So ... so she's more down to Earth than I'd expected. I know she could double-cross me, but I think she wants to succeed and then ... Well, I don't know. I get a small sliver of the pie, and maybe a chance to get my stuff in front of other people in Nashville."

"Mmm," I said. "That's the thing. She's going to hog you from the other folks, if she thinks you're really good. Better to lock you in and have you on her team. And it's not a bad arrangement for either of you."

"I feel like she talked to me as a favor to you, but now she really thinks I have that thing that she's looking for." She sighed. "Maybe the grasshopper thing is too corny. But I've worked on plenty of others."

She told me about the song about a guy who wouldn't hit a lick at a hognose snake. One about someone who did fentanyl before clocking in at the chicken plant, with fireworks going off inside his head so that he could stomach his work on the deboning line. One about finding secrets hidden on a cucumber vine, because the kudzu was loaded down with too many secrets from the family next door. Another one about hands covered in blood and blackberry juice. And one about the lower reaches of the Ohio River being where Kentucky would get its tramp stamp.

And then there was *it*, of course. If you're familiar with either Laura Beth Barton or Raina Valentine, then you know about their most popular song. Because I know both of them well, I can tell you that both of them have put it in their top ten. But it's not their all-time favorite. Their all-time favorite is the same song, funnily enough.

But that's not the song I want to talk about. The song I'm thinking of is, of course, "Ogalala."

You were my inland ocean, in springtime and through summer rains. And me, with my foolish emotions, I sure caused some hurricanes.

Raina had already written all of those words, but she hadn't showed them to anyone yet. She was still more sold on making something big out of the song about the snake. I have to thank Laura Beth for changing Raina's mind about that one. They redirected their energy into "Ogalala," and they made something timeless. But before they got to that point, Raina was trying to write something new every single day.

"I've just had all sorts of ideas," Raina said. "I'm glad that I'm finally getting to use them."

Getting Odd, Getting Even

Alma and Raina were always saying something. They could go on and on, but most of our conversations were worth having. Most of the things they said struck me as funny, or interesting, or notable. I remembered most of them without having to think too much about it, because their quips left an impression. Other times, I'd just have to write them down, because I needed to see *that* in writing. I didn't keep a daily diary, but I kept a notebook in my bag. Maybe it makes me seem too much like a blackmailer, but I would write down the good stuff. My notebook was filled with two categories of content: to-do lists, and wild things I'd overheard. Many of these remarks came from my own family — from chats, from phone calls, from secondhand gossip. What can I say? These folks have always had a way with words.

Raina always knew how to make me laugh, even when she was irritated. On one of our trips to visit Alma on the far side of Texas — and there were many, as it turned out — we were listening to music. We'd quit talking, because it was so hot, and we had the music playing as background noise. Somewhere outside Abilene, she let her irritation get the best of her.

"*Christ*, turn off that Ernest Tubb shit," she said. "I can't concentrate at all. I like it well enough. I don't hate him, you know, but it's all them string instruments. They're just sawing through me."

She enjoyed the silence for about two minutes. She started sighing, and then she gave me instructions about what to play.

"Put on some Three Six Mafia — that's what I listen to when I get a headache. *What?* The beat always calms me down."

"It doesn't saw through you?"

"Of course it doesn't. How could a drumbeat saw through you? Drums aren't sharp. Cymbals, maybe - but *drums* aren't sharp."

Raina was the songwriter and the poet, but Alma offered the best descriptions of random people. She said she knew a woman who looked like she "combed her hair with an egg beater or a spatula." She also knew someone who "could benefit from using a jade steamroller all over that body," because even though Alma didn't know precisely what a

jade roller did, she knew that this person needed "industrial-strength bodily intervention." Her friend's husband's sweaty work boots "smelled like stale crumble-in cornbread sopping up old buttermilk." All of her criticisms tickled me, no matter who she was going after: the "freelance pharmacologists" our cousins were dating, the blue jays that were "the pitbulls of the sky," and the previously-mentioned "Methodists-to-Campbellites-to-money-worshippers" that dotted our family tree.

"You know I've told you that that's offensive," I said.

"Which part? *Campbellite?* Or *money-worshipping?* That's one of the biggest religions in the country. It's second only to Methodism here in Texas. Now that I think about it, it probably overtook Methodism a couple of decades ago."

Alma could critique or be dismissive of anyone, from people she knew in real life to people she saw on TV. She described a has-been country singer as having a shrill voice that was so distinct, so obviously Kentuckian, that it would be a shame if she let it "wander across the coal fields and drift off, away from the limestone and the old iron furnace." She emphasized that this was a compliment. Shrillness, she said, is a commonality shared by many of Kentucky's best (and worst) singers.

Aside from people, she would wax poetic on the problems of the day. She was fond of saying things like "the Internet is the world's biggest high school" and "social media isn't a good place for antisocial people, *like yourself.*"

Raina once described Alma as the kind of person who doesn't remember if she shaved her legs two days or two weeks ago. But she'll notice a little tick crawling on your thigh and she'll pull it off before it can latch onto you. That's why she's valuable to a politician. She could notice *anything.*

She was also more logical than she might seem, with her awkwardness, her abruptness, her brazenness. She might act clueless, but she was always a few steps ahead. When she wasn't, she knew how to take a shortcut — and then she'd be *twenty* steps ahead. When our cousin wanted to take his new ATV out in the woods, she told him to follow the utility lines. She knew that the TVA kept that land mowed and manicured, and that he wouldn't get lost if he followed the lines. She was smart, and she was thoughtful - and when she could articulate her thoughts, she could be near-lethal.

Her sharp tongue would be an asset to Senator Sex. I asked her if she realized this.

“If you’ll remember, I live in Texas now," Alma said. "And I’ve been saying I’ve lived in Texas my whole life — because I feel like I was dead before I moved here."

I laughed. "Oh, you're already there - you're going to be a great politician's wife."

"I wouldn't put it like that," she said. "I've had to practice, though. I admit it. I've done some studying and some learning. I've looked up the codes for airports in countries I’ll never go to, just so that I know what sophisticated people are talking about. I’ve even learned about some of their colleges. I know where they’re at now. Dartmouth is in New Hampshire. I didn’t know that until three weeks ago. I'm still trying to find out where the rich Christians send their kids to school. And I don’t even know where those schools are. Valparaiso? Villanova? I don’t know anything about any of that. I still have miles to go. I only learned the other day that it’s *Croozay,* not *Crew-set*. But I will be a good girlfriend, able to make conversation with just about anyone. Even people who think they're better than me.”

She paused, long enough to take a sip of water from a non-branded metal bottle, and then she started up again.

"I don't want to be a politician's wife. I don't even want to be a wife. I'm not ready for that. I'm just trying to be *me*, Parker. Some people like me, and some don't. But I'm just the same as I've always been. And I'm always going to be a Valentine, because I was raised this way. There's nothing fake about us. We're made of some sturdy stuff - authentic stuff. Our people went to the bluegrass dance on Friday night, the fishing hole on Saturday, the church on Sunday, and then back to work on Monday morning. Our women worked in the factory, making lamps, coats, and bullets. Our men mined, ran the dragline out there, and did the cattle and the dairy and all that farming. Before that, they did the sharecropping. Generations of survivors. Our grandparents and great-grandparents survived all that hardship in Kentucky, and before that in Texas, and before that in Tennessee. We are descended from *bona fide* survivors. And I'm back in Texas, trying my damndest to make the family proud. I work hard, and I bring a little grit and gumption to the table. I'm serving grits every day. It's what I was put here to do."

"Great speech," I said. "It's all over the place, but it says a little bit of everything. You know, *you're* a politician, Alma."

"Nah, no. I'm just trying to tell you that I love you, and that I love my family, you know? Family. That’s more important — and absolutely more intimate — than friendship

or dating. It’s more painful to be spurned by the only people who are *supposed* to love you. But we all do a good job of taking care of each other, and ..."

She paused. She picked at a hangnail — a nervous habit. She was nervous, and *that* made me think she was sincere.

"Listen, Parker," she said. "You might think I was being too dramatic, and maybe it was a bit much. But I really do love and appreciate you. We wouldn't be *us* without each other. You and Raina have made me want to be a better woman, and I think it's all because I know that I come from good people, who made more good people. You're both so good, and I want to be good, too."

I started to say something, but she jumped back in.

"I just think I had to come out to Texas to realize my full potential. And I'm going to do my best. I'm actually going to be better than I've ever been."

Rachel Dycus

About a month into Senator Sex's campaign, we found out that Rachel Dycus would be coming to Alma's place to film something.

"Is it ... promotional stuff? She's making *ads* for the senator?" Raina asked.

"Well, I'll put it this way," Alma said. "She'll be helping us with the political advertising if we'll help her with a documentary."

I doubted that. Rachel Dycus making a political ad for the opposition? No way. But I knew that if anyone would be willing to chat on camera, it would be Alma.

"What's the documentary about?"

"About people who leave Kentucky," Alma said, and then gave me a pointed look. "And people who move back to Kentucky. I already volunteered you to talk to her about that."

"What?" I said. "No. No way. And — look, she may have told you she wanted to film a documentary about Kentucky. But I bet she's making a documentary about politicians, too. She's got access to —"

"I don't give a sweet fuckin' damn if she makes two hundred documentaries while she's down here. I just want her to make me look good. And I plan on making myself look good. You both have the opportunity to do the same — so take advantage of that."

I asked Raina to tell me a bit more about Rachel Dycus.

"The only thing I know about her now — as an adult, I mean, because I only knew *of* her as a teenager. But the only thing I know for sure is that when we were all college-aged, some folks had the impression she was a bitch. She donated money to her local NPR station just so that one of the hosts would give up their parking space at church and let her have it."

"What?" I was stunned. I didn't know there was a local NPR station back in that area, and I didn't know any of their more open-minded reporters went to church. "I guess I didn't know Rachel was big on church."

“Sure. I guess. I don't know. Maybe? They’re all Universal Unitarians.”

“Dang,” I said. I didn’t know there were any Unitarian churches around there, in the Sea of IBLP.

“One very small one. Anyway, one of my friends told me that she couldn’t judge her. When she was in college, she also bribed a guy to let her park off-campus. She didn’t want people to see the Thin Blue Line sticker on the back of the car her mom lent her. She was so embarrassed — of course, she would use it to get out of a ticket. But she still felt sheepish about it.”

Raina sighed, then spoke up again. “We all have our crosses to bear, I think, and when people can find a creative way to solve problems without hurting someone else, then I don’t mind it too much. Playing by the rules will hurt you *if* you don’t realize that other people are bending the rules here and there. You can keep playing by the rules, if you want to. But you’ve got to save your anger for the more serious offenses. And I don’t think Rachel’s an evil person. More than that, you know, I’m impressed that Alma has forgiven her.”

After that little speech, Raina told me a few other things about Rachel’s earlier years. She told me that she would always wrap her hair in a scarf *and* put on a jacket in a convertible, because she was afraid of sunburns and windburns. She thought this was just her being too precious — but then she realized that she was the type to plan ahead. And she knew about all sorts of “fancy” things, like whist and mikado.

I told Raina that this made Rachel sound like she lived inside *Rebecca.* “It wouldn’t surprise me,” she said. “She’s not stuck in it, but she’s a student of the past.”

The End of The Beginning

I don't have to tell you everything else, Rachel, because you already know how it's turned out.

Thank you for writing, again, and thank you for letting me use you as a sounding board. I know you'll keep all these letters and use them in another documentary. Perhaps your next documentary will be political, or musical, or genealogical. If you'd like to use any of this material, feel free. Just give me some credit, as Alma would say. I've long hoped that my name could be tied to something good.

As you know, the senator won his election, was re-elected, became Speaker of the House, and is about to run for president. It's only a matter of time before he trots the Future First Lady onstage, introducing her to the rest of the country. She's very comfortable on camera, after having been featured in a very prominent documentary. She won't be a liability. (I only hope I'm not a liability. Or maybe I hope I *am* a liability.)

Not too much of a liability, though. When I get out, I'd like to go back to a more quiet life.

Raina, of course, is a star. She's Decca to Alma's Deborah. She hates the senator, politically *and* personally, and she won't be attending any campaign events. She might even be publicly critical of the man. (*To say nothing of the woman!*) But Raina is a talented songwriter. She's still putting out music, she just won a Grammy, she's got a ton of celebrity fans, and there will be people who feel cheered at the fact that the First Lady has such a spirited, talented cousin. Raina won't be a liability. *I just hope I'm not too much of a liability.*

You know that *I* am the problem cousin. I was once the sweet, educated, medically-inclined cousin. I was the big-hearted-but-practical cousin. But I let my heart get in the way of my common sense. Or my *civility.* You know that I was fairly civic-minded, until I found out that we don't live in a caring society.

When I met my partner, I decided to finally move back to Kentucky. He was also medical, he also had roots in Kentucky, and he worked at the hospital that isn't that far from the old house. My man, he was a good man. He was never anything but a good man.

He was an anesthesiologist, which I'm sure you'd been told, and he had book-sense and street-sense. Raina approved of him, and that sealed the deal for me.

We were happy. We had three good years. But when he was diagnosed with a terminal illness, and when his own mother was also dying in the nursing home, he decided that the only way to cope was to get back at some of his worst enemies, to get back at some of the people who stood in the way of his survival. You know how these insurers are, and how predatory they can be. They were terrible to him, and even worse to his mother. Imagine being in medicine and going into medical debt; imagine being afraid that the nursing home is going to take the home out from under your parents. His dad would've been homeless. He and his mother were going to be gone, and all three of them were suffering.

When he realized that he probably wouldn't survive, and when he realized that he wouldn't have to face life in prison, you know what he did. You know what he did - and you know who he went after. You know what *I* did. I never pulled the trigger, but I drove the getaway car, and I drove us back from Illinois. *I finally got to be in the driver's seat.* And because I was an accomplice, I had to serve time.

I wish I could say that life was like a Hitchcock movie, and that in a cruel twist of fate, we'd found out that he *wasn't* terminally ill. Life isn't like a movie, of course — life is a documentary. Not even a documentary, because that involves the care of editing. You can cut out all of the fat and the gristle.

Life is like a book, or a journal, or something hand-written, something marked by scribbles and covered in crossed-out words. Our lives are just stories we're editing all the time. We're not even doing all the writing — we can only make small changes. We're just copy editors, and we can only change the small things. Believe me — I've tried.

I always wished he'd accidentally received the wrong results, or that he'd be able to take treatments and recover within months, within a year or two. I already knew that was foolish. More sensibly, I wished that he'd be able to live, even if he spent the rest of his life in prison. But he died before his trial even started. If I can be proud of one thing, it's that he died outside of the prison - and that he *felt* like a free man.

He died on the porch of our lake house. I'm sure you knew that, just as I'm sure you know that I *did* have to show up for my court date, that I plead guilty, that I was sentenced. I don't know if you know what happened to the house, though. The house is in Raina's name *and* in my name, so it's being taken care of. When I get out of prison, I

suspect that Raina will work out a deal with me. Not because she has to, with both names on the mortgage, but because she wants to.

Raina, truthfully, has always been the best of us. Alma and I are both too selfish. Raina cares about people with their hands tied behind their backs, with their wrists in cuffs, with their feet shackled. Raina cares about people who can't help her.

I wish Raina would run for president. ¡Ojalá! I wish, I wish, I wish. I can keep on wishing, I guess, because wishing is free. Perhaps you can convince her — or you can make a documentary about her. Leave Alma out of this one, please. It probably comes as no surprise that Alma hasn't sent me so much as a birthday card, because she cares about optics. She cares too much about a man who truthfully doesn't care all that much about her. Once, I received some mail from her, I thought, but it may have been from one of my former patients. They remember me well, and send me cards. I receive lots of mail from women, women who have also lost their partners, and I appreciate every letter.

Raina is more compassionate. She sends me a letter every month, even when she's busy. Sometimes, it's just a line on a page. And that's enough, really, to know that I won't be forgotten.

In the meantime, the house is waiting for me. The lake is waiting, too. In two more years, when I'm released, the first thing I'm going to do is jump in the water. I want to swim in my own inland ocean, in the bay I grew up near. I walked along the shore so many times that I can see it in my dreams, and I know that it will remember me, too. It will hold me like a memory.

I don't plan on drowning, Rachel. I plan on swimming. I will swim from one side of shore to the other, completely free. And if I'm lucky, the Tennessee River will help carry me back home.

The White Skunk

My sister told me she'd seen an enormous cat running through the garden. The fat tabby had slipped under the netting wrapped around the uneven rows of tomatoes and bell peppers. He wasn't interested in the plants—he was most interested in the baby bird that happened to be panicking on the soft garden soil.

The bird's open wings and little round body made him look like a flower—a squawking flower. All around the bird, cherry tomatoes rolled around. Some were overripe, some were half-eaten by bugs, but all of them were red. The little tomatoes looked like drops of blood. But the bird wasn't bleeding—its wing was obviously broken, but the bird was intact.

By the time I pulled on some gardening gloves, the bird had squeezed inside one of the tomato cages. I pushed the cat back and reached through the wires and the mesh. I pulled out the bird, a nervous ball of fluff and feathers.

At that point, I realized I didn't know what to do. This was the first time I'd rescued anything, and I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

I decided to wing it. That's what I'd always done.

Miraculously, the bird lived. Because the bird lived, I felt like I'd been given a special gift: the ability to help animals in need.

When I realized that I wanted to start helping animals, I didn't gravitate toward the same animals everyone else wanted to protect. Cats and dogs—there were so many other people around to save them. I had my sights set on forgotten creatures—*critters*. I wanted to help foxes, and raccoons, and the nasty beetles that ate the farmers' corn. I wanted to move snakes and snapping turtles out of the road. I wanted to put wooly worms and caterpillars and tiny frogs back in trees.

The first time I saw the white skunk, I knew what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to claim it, to snatch it up, to raise it as my own. I wanted to protect it from the rest of the world, because it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

The white skunk wasn't entirely white. It was black on the feet and the snout. I thought it was less cute than the skunks that were mostly black—but it had its own charm. It lived in the woods behind my house, and it seemed just like a fairytale creature, like one of Cinderella's pets or Bambi's friends. It was chubby and its fur looked soft. I just *needed* to touch that cotton candy fur!

I decided to set a humane trap. I'd put peanut butter and crackers on a plate inside a cage and wait for the door to snap shut behind him. After thinking about it for a while, I realized I didn't know how I'd get him back out. I felt anxious, even though I hadn't set the trap yet. I'd already started smothering the crackers with peanut butter, and while I thought about what to do, I ate some of the skunk's snack.

The state's fish and wildlife webpage said that I could throw a quilt over the cage to make him less nervous, and once he quit chittering, I'd be able to slide the front of the trap open. Scrolling down the page, I found similar advice about trapping raccoons, possums, and groundhogs. The instructions emphasized catching and relocating the animals, or even calling animal control. Every single section advised against keeping any of these animals as pets.

I still didn't know what to do. I knew what I *should* do, and I knew what I *wanted* to do. Turning a skunk into a pet was a bad idea, but I could settle for just putting my hands on that fur. I wanted to know if it felt as soft and wispy as thistledown. I wanted to bury my fingers in it, or brush it, and pet it over and over again. Or maybe twice. Just to say that I'd felt it.

I decided that I could leave the peanut butter and crackers on the back porch, out in the open. I would sit near the plate and—ever so gently—reach out to pet

him, after he'd stuffed himself. He was plump, so I figured I would make a big portion. I also made a couple extra for myself. I figured I'd dine with him.

After sitting on the porch for an hour, I decided that he wasn't coming tonight. It was nearly midnight, and the heat of the day had dissipated. Other animals—two baby possums and a big raccoon—skirted the corner of the yard, but they didn't move far from the woods. They didn't come near me or the plate of food.

I was about to give up when I heard the owl hooting. I looked up in the great sassafras tree closest to the yard. She seemed as big and as loud as a man—she cast an impressive shadow over the backyard, and it seemed like she would envelop me in her darkness. I loved her, and I felt like she could be my new friend. I wondered if I could trap an owl, even as it felt like she was trapping me.

I watched her without blinking —I couldn't look away from something so lovely. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. She was big and beautiful and perfect. Even with the white fur and the bloody mess at her feet, she was gorgeous.

Stragglers

In my neighborhood, there's a gas station that's been closed for ten years. The sign over the glass doors says *chips—snacks—juice—cigarettes—cold drinks*. But the only thing you can buy there now is meth. There are always cars out front, old Dodge Neons and new Dodge Challengers, and there are even more people wandering around on foot. Someone is always coming and going.

Whenever I stepped outside, I worried about looking too good—even when I knew I looked terrible. What I mean is, I didn't want to look too clean and get approached for money. I didn't even have money to spare. I was downwardly mobile—already poor and getting poorer all the time.

My mistake was that I'd never learned a trade. I'd worked in stores and offices and even down at the country club, but I never found anything that suited me. I wished I'd had more stability, like folks had fifty or sixty years ago. My grandfather, he'd had it made. He'd had the same job for forty-two years.

This was after the war, when the soldiers came home and got good jobs in the factories. Some went North, like my other grandfather, but others went farther South. Being in a good union meant that my granddad could take his crane-operating talents to South Beach. But my grandfather's machine was complicit in the destruction of the Everglades, in the destruction of a pluperfect paradise.

My dad grew up in a town called Fox Creek, right on the north side of the wetlands. The actual Fox Creek wasn't so much a creek as it was a canal, which carried water (and creatures, living and dead) all the way down to the ocean. My

dad would walk along the canal and shoot at water moccasins, stirring their nests and sending them scurrying up into someone else's backyard.

Life in Florida came with its hazards and its biohazards. My dad still has to get spots burnt off every so often, from all the time he spent in the tropical sun. In my mind, the animals and the sun were *nothing* compared to the people. The people were the real threat.

Dad's best friends, Charles and Dan, were also from Florida. They all lived in the business end of Florida. But their friendship ended when Charles got a little too wild. It was at Dan's wedding—his first wedding, to the lady who'd be his first *and* third wife. Charles leapt into a canal—a different canal, the C-6 Canal—during the reception. He splashed and screamed and showed out. Never mind the alligators and the runoff—he didn't care.

He wasn't afraid of anything. But I knew he was from one of the most frightening families in Boynton Beach, from a family that probably wrestled gators and rode manatees. I knew who they were, even though I grew up in a different state, in a safer corner of the world.

I grew up fearing Florida. Florida was the place where everything and everyone was crushed down. The state was built on destruction – the Seminole people being forced out of their homes, the coquina shells that were broken down to build the forts. I felt afraid of a place that destroyed more than it built. I never wanted to go back. The hurricanes and the wildlife in the present, that was bad enough. But I suspected Florida wanted to keep her worst and oldest secrets —and I always wanted to stay away from getting involved in Floridian business. I *really*

was afraid. I was even afraid of the glass-bottom boats. I couldn't understand why people wanted to see things that ought to be hidden underwater.

I had no desire to visit our family and friends (and family friends) in Florida. The past was meant to be buried under the waves of the past, buried under the white sands of time. I wanted to leave it alone, unexcavated.

I also worried that Florida might grab me by the ankles and drag me backwards into the ocean. I imagine that I would get lost or lose the last good parts of myself. I worried that I would wake up on the beach without my wallet or my sanity.

The truth is, I'd already started to lose my mind. I found myself growing disinterested in everything. I wanted to live, but life felt empty. Life was just a series of moments between working and doing chores. I loathed deadlines, washing machines, recipes, car maintenance. I hated making phone calls. I hated scheduling *anything*. I hated being bound by my forty-hour work week. When I thought about my own relationship to working, I felt despair.

Every weekday morning, I would play something called The Box Game with my big cat.

Let me explain The Box Game *after* I explain the big cat. The big cat is not big in the way that one normally thinks of a big cat—an obese tabby. My big cat. Oversized, tall, long-faced. He has sparkling black fur, like the dog from the Wings song. *Jet!*

My cat was big, but he wasn't very intimidating. He was a big bowl of pudding. He was an overgrown kitten. He loved to nestle down in an empty Amazon box. He understood that those boxes were a safe haven—a place to hide from the rest of the world, even though the rest of his world was a small apartment in Tennessee.

Now, The Box Game was a game the cat and I ended up playing almost by accident. One morning, he tried to nose his way in while I was brushing my teeth. At his full height—standing on his hind legs—he reached well above the doorknob. With minimal effort, he'd pushed the door completely open—and he stood there, looking embarrassed. I was only brushing my teeth, but I realized he thought I was in my own Amazon box. He thought I'd needed to rest, to shut the lid for a moment. He walked away, not even bothering to look over his shoulder.

He knew that my box time was *mine*. But what he didn't know was that, all day long, I was trapped in other boxes of varying sizes.

The car was the metal box that took me to a big, boxy building. My desk area was a box-shaped cubicle, with three laminate panels that kept me fenced in. And the fake work personality I'd crafted was the sturdiest box of all. It was invisible, but it was always present.

I found that, if I wanted to fit in with the people at my office, I had to accommodate the feelings of the people I worked with. I worked, for the most part, with men who weren't open-minded, who seemed more than slightly agitated by the thought of working with a thirty-year-old woman.

My little sister had told me she figured it would be easier working for a man in an office, but that was because she'd worked in places like daycares and salons, which drew both catty *and* holier-than-thou types. I never had a hard time getting along with women, and I wished I could find a less *bro*-y industry.

My manager made me dread coming in every morning. He could make an educated person feel inarticulate. I learned to ignore my manager's most finicky feedback, to be moderately friendly with the people who seemed amenable, and to carefully gray-rock everyone else.

I was one of the only workers who didn't have a nameplate, even though I'd already been there two years. I wondered if I never got a nameplate because they thought I'd eventually get married, *like women do*, and that I'd end up changing my last name. I also wondered if they'd simply counted on me leaving. It was a silly thing to get worked up about, but it still annoyed me. Because of not having a nameplate out as a reference, I was often addressed as *Mia*, not *Maya*.

"Mia, could you make some more coffee?"

"Mia, do you know if we have a meeting at 1:00?"

*"*Maya*, you may as well go ahead and quit your job and come on down to Florida …"*

That moment opened my eyes. When I finally heard someone say my name the right way, even though she'd only known me for five minutes, I knew it was time to jump ship.

But I'm getting ahead of myself now.

For now, let me make it clear that I'd reached my breaking point. I was already ready to quit, and I finally had an opportunity to leap.

It started when Evelyn—*Eva,* as most folks knew her—called me on my lunch break, when she told me that I ought to come back to Florida. As disgusting as the thought of going to Florida was, I realized that everything else in my life disgusted me.

Every day, I'd been balancing on the blade of a knife. I hated my manager's smarmy attitude, I hated the stale office air, and I hated my thirty-minute lunch breaks. I hated not having any freedom for more than half of the day, every day.

I thought about how much I'd wanted to give up. I thought of how much I'd wanted to win the lottery. That had been my only plan. Instead of going through the exhausting process of searching for a new job, I had decided to concentrate really hard on winning the Mega Millions. It seemed easier, and far less painful than getting my feelings hurt by going on fruitless interviews.

In my fantasy world, I would find out that I'd won the lottery while I was sitting at work. I would check the numbers over and over again. I wouldn't say

anything. I would just get up and walk out. I would never clean out my desk, or never return any calls, or pick my coat up off the hook on the wall behind my desk. I would just leave and never come back.

It turned out that I didn't need the Mega Millions. Evelyn Murphy—*Eva*—was my lottery. I could quit my job and flee to Florida. (Just temporarily, because I had no intention of staying in such a wild place.) Eva had a trip to go on—but it was a journey that would be better to take with someone else.

Eva was persuasive, sure, but I already made my mind up. I had to get out, to take a break, to move on to something else. Even if it was all uncertain. The sameness of everyday life was eating me up.

I looked down at my empty sandwich wrapper—the foil paper I'd started to ball up in my fist. I'd spent so long on the phone that I'd had to eat everything in three bites. I thought about the nauseating cheeseburger I'd just wolfed down, and about how the cheese smelled more like warm lunchroom milk than like an actual slice of cheddar. I almost retched.

I couldn't keep living like this. Half-existing. Florida was awful, but *this* was even worse. Pain was preferable to sinking deeper into complacency.

"I'll meet you somewhere in north Florida," I said. "Panama City."

"That's a long way from home, for me. Why do you want to meet there?"

“So I can turn around quickly if I feel like leaving.”

“Oh, Maya. How about we meet somewhere a little closer? Orlando, maybe?”

“You call me next week, and tell me which town to meet you in. But we’ll have to take your car the rest of the way.”

“Okay, big mama,” she said, and hung up before I could figure out if she was insulting me, or if she was just being like her granddad.

I dropped my cat off at my sister’s house the day after I quit my job.

“You’re taking the Fiero on a road trip?” she asked. “You trust that old thing?”

“Yep, I said, and that was that.

I got on the interstate and drove for seven hours. I only took two breaks— once to gas up and go to the bathroom, once to throw up on the side of the road.

It all really started with the phone call. I would’ve left my job, eventually, but Evelyn pushed me to act. She gave me permission to breathe. She helped me disassemble my box by giving me a new project.

I could focus on getting *this*, then, and then gain some confidence. If I could do *this*, then I could do anything.

I'm about to get ahead of myself, again. Let me tell you about what Eva'd asked me to do.

"Maya Moran?" Eva said. No *hello*. "You don't know me, Maya, but my granddad went to school with your—"

"My dad?" I said. "I know. It was Charles, right? I'm not trying to cut you off, but you don't have to tell me. I already know all about the fraternity. The falling out, too. You're not going to hurt my feelings."

"And I don't intend on it. I just wanted you and your dad to get that jacket back. And I want my grandmother's ring back."

"*What* jacket?"

"There," she said. "*There's* something you didn't know. I'm surprised you already know about the ring."

"I've heard about the ring," I said. "*Everybody's* heard about the ring. It's the ring that was stolen before the wedding, wasn't it?"

"It was stolen from my granddad *and* my grandma. It was going to be my grandma's wedding ring."

Evelyn was named after both of her grandmothers, who serendipitously happened to have the same name. She rarely answered to Evelyn. She preferred *Eve* and *Eva*. Before I knew all of this, I'd called her Evelyn, but she told me that I had to call her Eva.

"Eva and Maya," she said. "Partners in crime."

"Crime?" I asked.

"Crime and other pursuits. How would you like to come on a road trip with me? We have an opportunity to go to a nice event in Boynton Beach, and I think we have a window of opportunity to retrieve our heirlooms."

"I'm not breaking in anywhere," I said.

"We don't have to do *that*. The rightful owners of these items have a wonderful opportunity to present themselves and ask if we can have—"

"What are you talking about? What opportunity? An estate sale?"

"No. It's a party. They'll turn me away, Maya, if I go alone. They won't turn *you* away. I think Dan's family still likes you and yours."

"Daniel Davies?" I said. "You think they like me?"

"You *and* your family," Eva said. "Think about it. You could come down to sunny Florida and—"

"No," I said. "The sun here is good enough for me. A Tennessee sunset is just as good as a Florida sunset. The sun doesn't even set over the water, either place."

"Over Lake Okeechobee it does. It sets over the far side of the lake. And it's beautiful. You would know that, if you came home more often."

"Home," I laughed. "It's not my home. I'm a country girl."

"*Awwww*, no," she said. "Who says a country girl wouldn't be at home here, too?"

"You have the unchecked confidence of a— a person who's never been anxious," I said. "You can say *anything* and sound happy saying it. And you don't worry about everything, like I do. You worry about nothing, because you'll always find a way out."

"Maya," she said. She didn't sound irritated. She sounded happy, as if she'd been working at Disney for years, as if she couldn't un-Imagineer herself. "If it's money that's stopping you —"

"It is!" I snapped. "I know you don't know what it's like to have to crawl back to Tennessee with your tail tucked between your legs. *My* family has always had to do things like that, and I don't have much. I've never had a safety net."

“Most people don’t,” Eva said. “But I can tell you something about the Davies family. There’s nothing rich people—*really* rich people—love more than pretending to understand the ‘less fortunate.’ Pardon the expression. I hate it, too. Anyhow, they love pretending to be nice by taking a gullible poor person under their wing.”

“Is that what you want to do to me? Abduct me? Suffocate me under one of your wings?”

“Abduct you? No,” Eva said. “I’m not doing that. I’m giving you a chance to help me out. We can play everything up to her grandfather, to tell him we need the ring, the money for the ring, or else we’ll escalate things.”

“You mean pressing charges? Isn’t there some sort of statute of limitations?”

“Baby, you think those are the *only* bad things that man has done? I’ve done a lot of research. And I know some things that are more than hearsay.”

“You’re going to blackmail the whole family?” I asked.

“No. Besides, they already know that a lot of people know salacious things—within their inner circle, I mean. And there’s no point in going to the police. If I hang them out to dry, I’m going on the Internet. I want *everyone* to know. The police won’t do anything, but his business associates might kill him. He’s more afraid of his employees than he is of the police.”

I didn't say anything else. I just listened.

"Now, Maya, we need to butter up the granddaughter. That's Jelina Davies-Landreau. We need her to think that she's doing something kind by helping you. Get in her good graces, and maybe her granddad will act like we're back in his."

"I was never out of their good graces. It was *your* family who messed up." I kept my tone even. I didn't want to insult her, but I wanted her to know I wasn't a fool.

It was true, anyway, and she knew it. Her granddad was the one who ran past the armed guards at the wedding-of-the-century. He was the one who started shoving groomsmen in the canal, laughing and screaming and —

"Don't act precious about any of this," Eva said. "It's a miracle your dad didn't end up with liver failure, like mine did. Dad and Granddad both got eaten up by the magic elixir."

"I'm sorry," I said. "My cousin got completely messed up— between the drinking and the meth— and he lost our family farm. And then he died. So … I know how … how it can be. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," she said. "A farm is a lot of work. You can't afford to rest. Hell, that's how he probably got addicted in the first place—you need something to help keep your eyes open, to keep your wings flapping. But my granddad had a

parachute, and he knew when to use it. Except at the end. He couldn't let go of the bottle long enough to pull the strings on the parachute. That's why I don't drink. I don't want to add to my family's misery. Everyone's always drunk, except for me."

"Really?"

"*Really*." I didn't know whether I believed her, but I wanted to.

"So you're doing it for them? Not staying sober for you, but for them? You really care about your family. That'll be a star in your crown in the eyes of the Lord," I said.

"A star in my crown?" Eva said. "You must be mistaken. They won't let someone as mean as me into Heaven. And I wouldn't even look good in a crown."

"Eva, I don't think you're half as bad as me. I've learned to hide how mean I am. And I think that's a bigger sin."

"Well. I admit that I'm surprised by you," she said. "You're willing to be honest. You admit that you can be mean. So I need you on my team. We need to meet up with Jelina, and we can't back down. But I have a good feeling about this. After she spends ten minutes listening to you, she'll hand us the ring on a silver platter."

I agreed to meet Eva in Orlando. We would spend a week getting ready to meet Jelina, and then we'd show up at her family's party.

We would bring gifts—new gifts, gifts that weren't stolen. No replacement rings. Champagne. Wine glasses. A bouquet, too, maybe. We would make amends, somehow, and convince her that it was only right to help us.

We arrived at the Davies mansion on a Saturday morning, because Eva said the party started fairly early and would last all night.

We ended up taking my Fiero, even though her S-Class Mercedes was newer, nicer, and ran better. We decided it would give the Davies family a better picture of me and "my situation." Even though it wasn't a *dishonest* move, it still felt manipulative. I realized that I didn't really care, though— and so we drove my car up to the security window of the gated community.

"We're working the event," Eva said. "We're helping with the decorating."

I shrugged and nodded, and the man in the box waved us through.

"Where should we park?" I asked. I shouldn't have bothered wondering—there were white vans parked down a side street. Catering vans, a box truck filled with white folding chairs, all manner of party-stuff.

I parked behind one, right at the corner. We got out and started our long walk up to the mansion.

Everything— from the corner of the boulevard to the ornate iron gate— was covered in white and gold and green. *Some event,* I thought. There were golden balloons and little chalkboard signs, festooned with little rosettes made of silk georgette.

I stopped to read one of the signs. *Davies-Landreau and Stewart*. It dawned on me that this was an exclusive event—an event I'd almost certainly not been invited to.

"A *wedding*? A *big* wedding?" I hissed. "And her grandfather is right here? You knew all about this, Eva. You knew it was a wedding all along, and you didn't even hint at it."

"You never asked," she said.

I felt stupid, *so* stupid, and I faltered. "Oh, man. Oh, *man*. You're gonna get us in trouble again."

"*You* are going to be the one who gets us in trouble for the first time, if you don't calm down. The guys unloading the cake are already looking. *Ahhh*, Maya. You knew we were headed to the house on the canal, goofy girl," she said. "You think we'd be able to avoid dredging up the past, anyway? That's what we're here for. An unpleasant conversation."

I hung back a little, and then looked up at the house itself. I couldn't figure out whether the roof was made of clay tiles or sheet metal rolled to look like clay tiles.

I didn't know which one was sturdier, which one was more expensive. I was completely out of my depth. I was intimidated by everything, even the roof.

"It's—it's a beautiful home," I said, because I realized I had nothing else to say, and because I suspected our voices carried up to the people behind the gate. Eva was right. They kept looking at us and pointing down to the corner, pointing in the direction of the Fiero. "I have to assume living on the canal is safer. With all the hurricanes and floods, I mean."

"It's bold of you to assume it's safer anywhere, Maya. The world has never been a safe place. Even here, with the guard dogs and gardeners."

She sneered at the big house, at all of the bows and flowers. She was just like her grandfather. I admired her, and I also felt like I was going to die from the pit growing in my stomach.

"But you knew all about this? Didn't you?" I whispered, because the people kept watching, and because several of them moved closer to the gate. The big gate and the sidewalk separated us from a phone call to the police and trespassing charges. Eva didn't seem concerned, of course. She started smiling and waving.

"Eva, you knew this was a wedding. I'm not—I'm not taking any rings from a *bride*."

"Who said you're going to take that ring? I am. Besides, it's better than kissing it. You don't want to do that, do you?"

"No," I said. I was afraid of these people, but I also hated them. I hated them for stealing in the past. I hated them for looking down on us in the present. "*No*."

"Great. *I* will take the ring, and you will get rid of it, because I don't have the heart to get rid of a ring that was stolen from my grandmother. If she were alive, I would give it back to her, but—it's best to get rid of it. I don't want them to have it. That's the most important thing. I just want it gone."

"What?" I said. "You don't want to keep—"

"I can't let them win *this time*. We can't let them win this time."

So this was it— our chance to ruin another Davies wedding. Ten years ago, I would've balked at the idea. Two weeks ago, I would've protested. But now—seeing how insulated and sheltered they were— I didn't care about ruining *any* weddings. They could always afford another wedding. They could afford a whole harem's worth of weddings.

He would never let us in, of course—the grandfather, Dan Davies. He approached the fence and he recognized us on sight. We looked too much like the men who came before us.

He wanted to call us nasty names, I'm almost certain, but he held back. He looked at Eva, he looked at me, and he offered us a hundred dollars each to leave. Eva scoffed.

"*Two* hundred, then," he said.

"No way," she said, grinning up at him. "I won't leave for less than five thousand. Moran won't leave for less than eight. She's meaner than she looks."

He glanced back at me. I glared at him.

"... Now, uh, *ladies*, I don't have my checkbook on hand, but—"

"Then step inside and get it. We can wait." I turned to Eva, hoping I'd sounded calm and said the right thing. She moved closer to the gate, and I knew that *that*—moving forward instead of backward—meant I'd made a good move.

"Hmmmpf," he said. "I'm sure we can negotiate something a little more fair. I have nine-hundred in *cash*, right here, and—"

"No sale. You'd better stand here all day, if you want to keep us out," Eva said. "Don't let your guard down. We'll be back later. *With dates*."

I wanted to cry. I stood there, looked at her, looked at him, and nodded. He seemed more taken aback by me than by Eva—as if my endorsement meant that I'd fallen into the viper pit.

But I couldn't help but trust Eva— even though I knew she'd lied to me once. A lie by omission. A lie that only happened because I was too foolish to ask important questions.

I walked back over to the Fiero, which I'd taken pains to make look more presentable. I wanted to impress the people in the gated community before I'd known we'd be crashing a wedding.

I had known they'd judge my old car, anyway, so I'd tried hard to make her shine. I'd waxed her until she gleamed, redder than the roses in the mansion's big garden. And I'd even propped the eye-lights back open with something more sturdy than tape and zip ties.

We'd gone back to planning and plotting. We scrolled through all of the people Jelina followed on Instagram and found the name of the officiant, the photographer, the catering company, and the hairstylist and makeup team.

We made notes of all of these people, deciding who we'd latch on to. We decided to hide out with the catering folks, to slide through any gates and doors they left open as they loaded and unloaded trays and boxes.

We knew we'd have to make it back inside the gated community in a different car, or on foot, or by coming up the canal. But we knew we could manage that.

We picked out what we hoped were inconspicuous outfits— black shirts, black hose, white blouses, and little black ribbon bows. We hoped that we wouldn't look too suspicious.

Our last bit of business was our wedding gift. We went out, thirty minutes before we headed back over to the mansion, and bought a cardboard box, white wrapping paper, gold ribbon, and cigarettes. We also bought a novelty lighter shaped like a gun, just because Eva wanted it, and I made her promise not to take it inside.

On a sidewalk in a neighborhood outside of the gated community, we prepared our gift. Eva opened her cigarettes and tossed two inside the box — "for the happy bride and groom"— and then we wrapped it, made a fancy bow out of the ribbon, and added a tag. *From family friends.*

We made it back inside. We followed the canal, picked our way into a neighbor's yard, and squeezed through some hedges.

"They don't do much to fortify the back," Eva said. "Besides the moat. They don't count on pirates like us."

I suddenly felt like Sancho Panza. *Sancha* Panza. Even so, I kept moving.

We milled around inside the yard, late-coming stragglers. We picked our way over to the catering crew, pretending to look busy, biding our time, waiting for a moment when we could catch the bride off guard. I was still holding the box— the

box I'd been careful not to drop or crush, at the expense of tearing my hose. It seemed that the wedding had wrapped up before we'd arrived. The reception was about to start.

I noticed a nervous-looking man holding some sort of reflective material. He was a photographer's assistant. He was the one of the men I'd seen on Instagram, so I felt certain that I could approach him.

"Oh! Are you taking pictures of the bride now?" I asked, making sure Eva was right beside me. "I haven't seen her anywhere."

"We're about to take some group photos. The bride and her friends. Well, three of them. We can't find the other one. Probably in the bathroom. Too much whiskey."

"I know how that is," I lied. "Listen, I'm one of the bride's high school friends. So is she. I know it's silly, but we wanted to find her and give her this gift."

I cradled my nearly-empty box, hugging it more tightly than I'd hug a loaded safe.

The photographer's assistant shrugged. "Follow me."

My heart was in my throat. We followed him up the low steps in the yard, past throngs of people, past people who surely suspected we weren't supposed to be

there. Eva was giddy. I was mildly apoplectic. I couldn't stand being stared at, but Eva took it all in stride, smiling at everyone.

"Not many people are even looking at us," she said. "Loosen up. And smile at the ones who *are* looking. You look more suspicious with your shoulders up around your ears."

"*Mmmm*," I said.

"How are you going to speak when we get up on the patio? There they are! Our friends!"

Eva's voice was loud—so loud. *Everyone* on the patio looked at us, and they seemed mildly amused by the arrival of the help.

"Gift for you!" I blurted, holding the box out in front of me, unable to think of anything else to say.

"Congratulations to the happy couple," Eva said. She sounded genuine, smooth-as-honey-and-silk, even-keeled, *kind.*

"I'm sorry," she said. "Do I know you?"

"Jelina? You don't recognize us? Really?" Eva was calm and collected. But I was about to bite my tongue off.

Jelina shook her head. “No. I don’t think we’ve met.”

“I think we need to talk,” I said. “Dis—discreetly, maybe? Can we step off to the side? I— I think Eva and I—”

“We have some business with the bride. It’s going to be fun. I promise,” Eva said.

Jelina’s eyes sparkled. She seemed to think we were working on something. A performance, or a prank, or a big surprise. A flash mob? A cake with a naked fella in it? A new car?

“Sure, sure. Let’s use the sunroom. Wait for me, y’all— we’ll be right back!”

The bridesmaids giggled and trilled. They seemed to wonder what the big surprise would be.

“Can we leave the doors and windows open? I need some fresh air,” I said, as we walked into the sunroom. But I could already see that all the windows and doors were open, with lace curtains that billowed in the breeze.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Jelina said. “You look like you’re going to be sick.”

“Weddings do this to her,” Eva said. “They aren’t really her thing.”

I looked at both of them. They looked at me. I nodded, after a few beats of silence.

"Now, what did you say your names were? And who sent you up here? Is this about the—"

"One question at a time," Eva said. "Our names are Maya and Eva, and we're here on our own business. Unfinished business."

Jelina looked wary, uncomfortable. Before she could get in a word edgewise, Eva kept talking.

"You haven't opened your gift. Go ahead. We'll wait."

I was aware of how dark the sunroom seemed, with only candles to light it up. I imagined a lace curtain floating over one of the candles, catching fire, trapping us. We would burn to a crisp and we would get blamed, even though we didn't touch anything.

I looked at Eva, and at Jelina. I finally spoke. "It's a small gift."

"It's not a dead lizard or something?" Jelina asked.

"Oh, no," Eva said. "It's a gift for the bride and the groom."

Jelina got to work unwrapping the box. Eva kept talking.

"Now, Green Gills over here might need one, if you're willing to share. Maya, listen, I may have a few more in my pocket."

"I don't smoke," I said.

"Fine. Jelina and I, we'll have a toast with our cigarettes. You can hold a tea light and still be part of the action. Give us a light."

I lit Jelina's cigarette first, and then Eva's. I gripped the candle, dumbly, willing myself not to let go of the little jar. It wasn't even hot, but my hands were clammy.

"There," Eva said. "To the happy couple."

They smoked in silence. Jelina kept looking at me. I knew she knew that I was the weaker one, but I also detected a sense of pity.

She was telling herself that she wouldn't spit me up and chew me out, because I didn't even taste good. I didn't taste like menthols, but I also didn't taste like an Erewhon salad. I tasted like chips from the gas station. I tasted like stale graham crackers from a public school lunchroom. I tasted like the dollar menu, or the ketchup packet crushed in the McDonald's parking lot, and—

“Let me see the fucking ring,” I shouted. I couldn’t even believe my own rage. This wasn’t even my battle, not really. I nearly clapped my hands over my mouth, but I opened my phone’s camera instead. I wanted to make her squirm a little.

“I’m not trying to put you on the spot, Jelina. But we need to see that ring. The wedding ring. That’s the *same* ring. It is. I see it, and I know what it looks like. That’s the ring we came to see.”

I kept my camera open, aimed squarely at Jelina, with a sliver of Eva on the right corner. I wanted to film the entire exchange. “We just want to see if your granddad stole that ring from *her* granddad. It looks like the same one he bought Evelyn way back when.”

“It was a *gift*,” Jelina said. “And so was your dad’s leather jacket. To make up forall the problems they caused when —”

“It was *not*,” I said, feeling hysterical. I knew I was making it worse. I knew all the shouting might draw a crowd. “My dad told me your granddad didn’t have the money for a ring, because he lost the ring money at a Seminole casino. That’s right. So he stole this one from Charles, before he could give it to Evelyn. He had to buy a new ring and get that one engraved, but the initials inside are going to be the same. *EHD*, not *CJD*. I bet you were all too cheap to get that fixed. Probably said it stands for something like *every happy day*, or— something like that. So pull it off and show us.”

“I won’t,” Jelina shouted, but she sounded uncertain. “I just put it on. Why would I take it off so soon?”

People were coming up from the garden, pressing up against the open windows, listening to our argument.

"Jelina, it's not your ring, and it wasn't really your grandmother's ring. It belonged to Charles, and it ought to belong to Eva."

"But I was her only granddaughter! This is all she ever had to give to me," Jelina wailed.

"All she ever had to give to you? She gave you a *mansion* by the *ocean*! Eva told me all about it. We looked at it on Google Maps before I came down here."

"That's gone, now. The hurricane."

*"*It was a *bad* hurricane," Eva said, and I realized then that I'd done all of the talking. "I remember that one. Wiped out my brother's vacation home."

"Just *show* us the inside of the ring," I said, willing myself to rein it in. "We'll leave you alone, if you can prove it's not Eva's."

I was impressed by the fact that I was leading the charge. I'd done so much screaming that even more people from the garden flocked up to the sunroom to see what all of the shouting was about.

“Here,” I said, more calmly. “Let’s let your friends keep having fun. Nothing to worry about, everybody— it’s nothing major! We just need to have this conversation somewhere private, folks, and—”

I turned to the nearest door and threw it open. I didn’t realize it was a storage closet. A well-lit, private room. Probably where they stored their pickleball rackets and gardening tools. As I’d pulled the door open, we were treated to the (unpleasant) sight of the groom’s writhing backside. He was fully entwined with some lady in a champagne-colored dress. It was a dress that looked suspiciously like a bridesmaid’s dress.

Eva stood up and pulled me out it the way, pinning both of us up against the wallbeside the door.

“Hold it open,” she whispered, and I realized I hadn’t let go of my phone or the doorknob. I held the door wide open, and left the groom and the bridesmaid half-naked to the world.

The crowd was stunned. No one said anything— not even the poor young woman he’d pinned to the storage shelves.

“My God,” I finally said, locking eyes with the unfortunate bridesmaid. “Stop. *Stop*. They’re all getting you on video. Caught on tape!” When it started, I was the only one filming— but I noticed several other people had their phones out and their flashlights on.

Jelina kept smoking. The groom looked sheepish *and* angry. Eva looked at me.

"*Ooh*," she said, squeezing my arm. "Here comes Mr. Davies."

The old man waddled up to the sunroom, ranting and cursing.

"You *bitches*— I knew it! You're horrible! You people always ruin everything! That's the only thing you two are good for."

"*You people*?" I said. "Did anyone else hear him say *that*?" My question went unanswered, of course.

"You two need to get out of here!" He was hollering, turning purple, waving his arms. I expected him to lunge at us. I backed away, but Eva stepped forward.

"We don't have to be nice *or* good — we don't owe *you* anything. And you want to talk about being good, by the way? You're worse than either of us." Evelyn glared at the groom. "They all know about his girlfriend here. They'll tell their preachers, and they'll tell their preachers' wives. It'll be all over all the churches tomorrow morning. Shame about that, really—that you all left the Episcopalians to go to an Evangelical church in a strip mall. If they were polite Episcopalians, they'd probably help you save face. But all those gossipy old biddies won't help you now."

"*Eff you*," the groom said. He was too prim to curse, but not chaste enough to not cheat on his wedding day. "Eff you *both*. I know all about your little grudge.

Everyone here knows that you're not supposed to be here— they've been saying they'll call the police if they see you."

"Really?" I said. "If I were you, I'd shut up. You haven't even zipped your pants."

"I hope someone pushes *both* of you into a canal," he said. He had the gall to laugh. "You both ought to drown."

"We both know how to tread water," Eva said. "So that won't be happening."

I turned to Jelina, and the throng behind her, their phones still aimed at the groom. "Now," I said. "We won't tell anyone else about The Incident. But you'd better not press trespass charges against either of us."

"After all the trouble we've given each other, you could get us to walk out now by getting rid of that old thing," Eva said. "The cursed ring, the ring that ruins marriages and families."

I hadn't counted on Jelina being superstitious. But she was superstitious *and* embarrassed.

"I'll give it to you if it means never having to see either of you again."

“Yes,” Eva said. “You’re going to let the two of us walk out of here with that ring. And some of that wedding cake. And we promise you’ll never see us again. Here, I’ll throw in a few cigarettes, too. You look like you need ‘em.”

Jelina frowned, turning to her friends and family. They were either yelling or filming or both. She realized, then, that no one would be coming to comfort her. “You can take the damn ring. And take the damn cake. The whole cake. I’m sick of everyone here! Just let me go back upstairs. I’m going to bed and I’ll deal with *him* when I wake up tomorrow.”

She pulled the ring off and pressed it into my hands. I held it up, examining the gold and the engraving. I couldn’t believe it. It *was* the ring. I would’ve taken it, even if it hadn’t been.

We raced back down the steps, me and Eva. We pulled the top tier off of the cake— tossing the bride and groom onto the table, carving off the marzipan frosting that looked too expensive and tasted too sweet, dropping the carefully-placed unlit sparklers onto the grass— and we put it back in a box. One of the waiters moved to help us, locked eyes with Mr. Davies up on the patio, and stepped away.

“You’ve already been paid,” Eva said. “Don’t be shy, and don’t be afraid of the old man. He’s about—”

She glanced down at her hand, at the beautiful ring she’d placed on her middle finger.

“About 5,000 dollars less wealthy tonight. He’s never been a good gambler, and money isn’t his strong suit. So come back here and help us.”

And so the young man did, boxing up a second tier and handing it to Eva. She smiled.

“Enjoy the champagne,” I shouted, as I walked back toward the canal. It didn’t even occur to me that we could walk out the front gate. In hindsight, I wouldn’t have wanted to. “I’d get drunk, if I could! But we have to drive all night!”

Eva lit another cigarette as soon as we got out of my car. She grabbed her head and claimed she had a mild migraine from all the shouting and from not having eaten anything besides cake.

I asked if we had any money for a pit stop at McDonald’s, but we didn’t have much left besides gas money, and we’d barely rolled back into Fox Creek, coasting in on fumes.

I leaned over the railing at the Lake Okeechobee overlook. Eva had taken off the ring, and we’d dropped it in a glass jar. (The jar, of course, came from one of the tables at the wedding. I don’t make a habit of carrying around glass jars. I also hadn’t made a habit of stealing, but I didn’t care about how it looked this time, what with all the bigger sins surrounding us.)

I looked at Eva. She looked down at her cigarette. Eventually, she turned to me and nodded. She closed her eyes. I closed the lid, tightening it extra hard. I tossed the ring and the almost-empty jar as far into the lake as I could.

Sunlight danced across the water — little sparkles of diamonds scattered everywhere. The light shimmered harder closer to the shore, and I realized that those diamonds looked more like rhinestones or glitter. Nothing too precious. Nothing that would last forever.

Someday, someone would find the ring after it had washed down the canal, all the way down to the Biscayne Bay. They would wonder which pirates had captured such a small piece of plunder, even though just about any jeweler in Miami could bring out something newer and more expensive— something that sparkled exquisitely— in a little velvet box.

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I needed somewhere to go – but I needed the money more than anything. I should start there, because that's the important part: getting money. I had to get money, because I'd never found an honest way to make it.

But I had a plan. It wasn't a good plan, or a nice plan, but it would take care of my finances. And to make that plan work, I needed somewhere to go, and someplace to stay.

I knew someone who could take me in, but I didn't want to call her. I didn't want to talk to her ever again - not because she was a bad person. Her kids were, though. They were my worst and stupidest cousins.

They're gone now. They were way out in the cemetery, buried in a row by themselves. I imagined they didn't get many visitors, besides their mother. Now, I knew I could call her without worrying about having to talk to those assholes. But I really didn't want to hurt her. I knew in my gut that this would hurt us - and she'd been hurt too many times.

I didn't have any other options, and I was running out of time. I bit my lip and pressed the *Call* button. She answered on the second ring, which turned my stomach. She actually wanted to talk to me. I felt awful. I could only imagine what terrible shit I'd be dragging her into, but I wanted to sound pleasant, even if I couldn't be pleasant.

"Vashti, baby girl," she said. "How are you?"

"Cousin Linda - I have a big favor to ask. I'm starting a new job in your area next week and ... God, I hate to ask you to do this. Could I come stay with you?"

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I need this money more than I've ever needed anything else. It's the only thing that can keep me alive.

It's not because I'm buying or selling anything illegal. Someday, maybe, I can tell you about why I need this money. But think about it - who among us doesn't need money?

I'm not like my cousins: a dead drug addict and a dead car thief. The car thief, he deserved what he got. He brought it on himself. I know I ought to be more sympathetic - considering what I'm about to do. Maybe I'll be more kind and sympathetic in time, when I've reached the bottom of my own barrel.

Right now, money is more important than sympathy. But I'm not gonna be mean to Cousin Linda. I'm gonna listen to every single story she tells me, I'm gonna eat breakfast with her every morning, and then I'm going to find a way to (politely) fill my days while I'm searching for Jackie Gibson.

That's where I'll get my money - when I find Jackie Gibson. And I don't feel sorry for him, because he's a bad man who's going to get what's coming to him.

But Cousin Linda is so nice - so nice - that I have to stop thinking about Jackie Gibson and start listening to one of her stories.

“Vashti, I don't even know. I remember that that was the last thing I told him, "If you keep misbehaving, I can't let you live here. You have to learn how to act right. And if you don't, I hope you crash into a tree.' And what do you think happened?”

“He crashed that big damn truck into a tree?”

“Into a guardrail. But it didn’t make much difference what he hit, I guess. He's dead now.”

"Well," I said. "I'm sorry."

I meant it, too. I gave her hand a squeeze, and I tried to change the topic. Ease her on to something a bit more pleasant.

"Could I ask you something? I want to learn more about our family while I'm down here. Our family history and stuff."

"Sure," she said, brightening right up. "That's one of my own hobbies. You know, I'd love to take you to meet some good people down at the local museum. You know that old gas station, when you first pull into town? It doesn't look like much from the outside, but they've cleaned it up inside, and everyone down there is real friendly. Mr. Martin and Miss Doreen are real good at tracing family trees, too. They can find anybody. They'd love to help us."

I almost tensed up - almost. I was careful not to let it show.

"I would love to, but ... don't tell anyone I'm down here right now. At least not for a couple weeks. I'm not sure this new job is gonna work out - I might turn tail and head back to Kentucky if things don't work out. But if I get settled in, I would love to ... I would really appreciate that. Getting to meet more folks down here in Unicoi."

"Oh, you really ought to. Half of these folks are your family!"

I smiled. "And what about the other half?"

She didn't have an answer. She just threw her head back and laughed.

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It was my first full week of looking for Jackie Gibson that I realized someone else was looking for Jackie, too.

I realized someone else was following many of the same trails, because we kept turning up at the same stores, in the same church parking lots, at the same county events - the trade day and the early-morning coffee klatsch. I'm perceptive enough that I recognized the only other person standing at the margins, the only other person who was really studying the crowds.

I decided to take my chances and meet up with Jackie's other stalker.

I knew who he was, even if he didn't know who I was. I left a note in his mailbox and told him he needed to have lunch at Hardee's with the other person following J.G. I gave him instructions for who to be expecting, so he didn't seem surprised when I settled in at his table.

"Somebody told me you're looking for Jackie," he said, through a mouthful of fries. He swallowed hard, but it was only because of the food. He didn't seem nervous at all. "But who the hell are you?"

“I’m Lola Montez.”

“Bullshit. Your name isn’t Lola Montez. That’s some old dead gal that sang opera or something. Mmm. You have a familiar face. I ain’t say a pretty face, before you get all full of yourself. But I'd recognize you, from somewhere. What if you get caught doing what I think you're doing?”

"Depends. Are we both doing the same thing? Besides, I've never been caught before,” I lied.

“So you've done it before?”

I didn't answer that question. I just asked him to answer something for me.

“Have you ever bought a car from a police auction?”

“I don’t mess with that sort of shit,” he said.

“I just wanna know, can you buy your own car back from a police auction? Or what about a relative’s car? But if you know nothing about it, and you claim not to get involved in that sort of thing, then I guess I ought to ask someone else.”

He was silent.

“You know what I think? I think you know more than you let on, sir. Not just about the police. I think you can assess all kinds of dilemmas. And I think we have an issue that we ought to discuss. We were sent here to get the same person, I think.”

"Prove it," he said.

"You first," I said. "You know I'm not a cop. I'm too young and useless. But I want you to prove you're not a cop."

"I don't normally play games like these, but I'll humor you one time. Jackie Gibson. She's the one who -"

"She?" I said. "Are you sure? I'm looking for Jackie Gibson. You know who I mean? Jack Gibson. A man. That's a … a different Jackie."

He seemed to understand immediately. He knew who I was looking for. He knew why I was looking for him.

"I can tell you’re a good enough kid," he said. "I’ll leave you to it."

And at that moment, I panicked. I figured he might start talking. Might tell other people why I was there. So I stopped him before he could leave.

"Listen, sir," I said. I didn't want to call any man *sir*, but I thought he might appreciate a touch of respect. He just smirked. But I didn't flinch.

"Why don't we help each other out, then? I'm not opposed to working together."

***

I know you're not supposed to give away the end at the beginning. But I'm trying to move the story along.

Jackie Gibson — the lady Jackie — was my cousin.

I had a pretty good idea of it, even at the time. And with a bit of questioning (of Cousin Linda) and a bit of careful surveillance (of Linda's neighbors), I confirmed my relationship to Jackie. At this point, anyone with sense is probably wondering why I would want to go along with this plan — to work together to kill two birds (two Jackies) with one stone. I wasn't sure what to do, to be honest. But I decided to keep watching her. I started feeling sorry for my distant cousin. And — after years of not wanting to do anything kind for most of the folks in my family — I started wanting something. I wanted to keep her alive.

I also wanted to protect Cousin Linda from finding out about the bad things people were willing to do to her family, her flesh and blood. I really liked Cousin Linda. She's always been the keeper of the family lore. She had all these interesting theories she'd come up with while doing research on the family — Mullins, Collins, a bunch of others, and — naturally — Gibson. It seemed like everybody was all interrelated, because we were. And Linda had all these theories and ideas about the intertwining history of these families.

"Our Gibsons, they were called Melungeons. Well, you have to understand, these people said they were Portuguese, right? But it seems like they aren't, not entirely. It's just

another story — it's always 'just another story' until someone says otherwise. They brought in some folks to try to find out the backgrounds of all these families. Europe and Africa. That's it. That's where they were from. And then they started digging deeper. They said that some of these people were maybe born back when there were Portuguese sailors going to and fro, tearing up Africa. That’s gotta be where the Portuguese story came from."

"So they were some of the first Afro-Latinos?" I asked. "Maybe a little like people in Brazil?"

"Oh, well. I don't know how to label them, not really. This is what I do know: our people were born on rivers of blood. Just like the tidewaters, where all the water runs together into the oceans, all of the blood of our ancestors — good and bad — keeps spilling through us. And out of us. We're tough, like them. And like most all women, we can stand up to anyone — enemies, dogs, men. But we can’t stand up to nature, when it sends a flood or a wildfire to mess up our houses and homes. We're tougher than everything but nature, seems like. But we're a part of nature. Don't forget that."

My heart ached for her, and for me, knowing that Cousin Linda had a strength that I hadn't yet found. She'd come out the other side of pain and strife with an appreciation for surviving all the aches, big and small. She could hang on, just when I was beginning to think that I couldn't.

"Well, now that I think about it, I get it," she said, pulling me out of my thoughts and back into her kitchen. "It seems like they might’ve been like the Brazilians. But I’d say a label like that isn't mine to give out. I just love the history of it all. I like getting the whole picture, all the way back to the beginning."

Cousin Linda loved the past, but I'd noticed she wasn't stuck in it. She was the same one who dealt with her neighbor Roger when he was hateful to his own kid.

He said that he didn’t see why the kid cared so much about "gay stuff" when the kid first decided to try out a new name, a name that wasn't really feminine or masculine.

“Can’t you see that that’s what he thinks about because that change is gonna save his life?”

“Aw, hell. You’re going along with it, too. Why think about it that much? Who has time to think about changing that type of shit?”

“I can tell you've never spent a lot of time thinking about change,” Linda told him. “Considering you never plan on leaving this place. But younger people have different dreams. Dreams outside of living and dying here. And if they do decide to come back, they want to make things nicer. And that's hard to do, living in a place where your neighbors hate their own families.”

"Linda, you don't know half of what we've seen and heard and -"

"You couldn't even imagine the things I've seen and heard. You probably couldn't imagine the things I've done myself," Linda said.

"Sometimes," Roger said, "I don't know whose side you're on. I don’t know what to make of you."

"Well, luckily for you, you don’t have to make anything of me. I'm already fully formed."

This shut him up. I could tell that Linda was able to make just about any man shut up, which is a skill that's usually honed from being subjected to a bunch of bullshit. I had a feeling she knew bad shit, but I wanted to protect Linda from anything violent.

I wanted to protect DreaAnna’s feelings, too — DreaAnna being Jackie’s daughter. And her son Jared - I didn’t want to see him suffer.

He was a terrible kid, and he seemed mad at the world, but I could understand that. I ran into him at the gas station one night, just about a week after I got here. I was buying pickle fries, fresh from the grill behind the counter. I had my little cup of ranch dressing and a wad of napkins, and I was thinking about sitting down at one of the tables by the front window, even though I knew someone might lure me into a conversation.

I turned around to go find a different seat when a bunch of boys burst through the doors. They were agitated, talking about how the vape shop was closed, and how they'd better be able to at least get some cigarettes up here. Jared spotted me immediately, and instead of hiding from each other, we both nodded. He moved toward me, but he didn't seem like he wanted to do anything dangerous. The worst he could do was try to bum money off of me, and considering the business with his mother, I wasn't in a position to deny him a couple of dollars. I wanted to help, but I didn't want to do too much. I didn't want to be obvious about it.

”Hey," he said, leaving his friends at the counter, coming over to greet me. "It’s you, back again. You staying at Linda’s place?”

“Yessir,” I said. “You can answer a question for me, actually - you're still in high school, right? What’s happening over there tonight? Lots of cars in the parking lot. Lots of nice cars, too. I like the looks of that purple Hellcat, but - it seems like a whole lot of chopping and not much chips."

Jared liked working on old cars. I figured he'd be a good mechanic someday. He laughed and laughed at what I'd said - and I liked to see the kid smile. A cloud was hanging over him, even if he didn't know it. He had to know it, because most people are well-acquainted with their family's flaws. Making him laugh in a time of trouble was a small gesture. But I didn't want him to see it as a gesture. I just wanted to be a decent cousin.

"I couldn't make myself buy something like that," he said. "It would get stripped down for parts, for starters, if you didn't keep it locked in the garage. Couldn't park that at our house. Besides, I don't have the money, because we ain't made of money."

"You're preaching to the choir," I said. "I figure the best we can do is a used Mustang."

"Hell," one of the boys said, running over from the counter. "You ought to see my dad's Mustang. It's rebadged and it's not an Ecoboost."

Jared ignored his friend. "Them folks up at the high school? She asked about the crowd up there. Those shitasses play basketball on a Saturday night when they could be out here having fun. I don't know — maybe some people like it, but I'm not gonna go watch it. We have better things to do."

"Cool," I said. I was hoping he'd tell me what his mom was up to — I wanted to know if his parents were at the game, or at a drive-in, or fighting at home. "Are y'all going to be at home this weekend? I guess I ought to come visit my cousins at some point. How are things going with y'all - with your parents?"

"They tried to get my damn dog taken away. They said I don't need a pitbull."

"Everybody needs a good dog," I said. "I'm sorry."

And I was. I felt sorry for Jared, sorry for his sister, sorry for my cousins. I was sorry for Jackie's family.

But I wasn't too worried about her husband — he was the one who wanted someone to take care of her, if you get what I'm saying.

I didn't feel too sorry for that old goat. Not a damn bit.

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“You can’t do it. We can’t do this,” I said. “I can’t go after the lady. I'm backing out.”

“What do you mean?” the other stalker said. “Don't go soft out of nowhere. You said you’re just doing this for money, anyway. And don’t act like you're better than me, considering you came here all the way from Kentucky to kill a man.”

“I’m doing this for money, but I’m also doing this because he’s a bad person.”

I paused, waiting to see if he’d ask any questions. He didn’t — surely he knew how bad Jackie was without me having to explain it all — so I plowed on. “I needed to come down here anyway. Living in Tennessee, I’m halfway between my North Carolina cousins and my Kentucky cousins.”

“You’ve got both?”

“Yes — a lot of folks around here do. You're probably no exception. Mine are mostly Mullinses and Goinses.” I didn’t tell him about his Jackie Gibson being my cousin, so I left out mentioning that connection to the Gibsons. “It’s not like we’re talking about people from Mars, sir.”

“To me, people from Kentucky might as well be from Mars.”

“What does that mean? You can’t be talking about rednecks. You’re a mountain man, sir.”

“Anybody from outside of here is an alien. Tourists, land developers, all of that. Even the nice ones don’t appreciate this place, not really.”

“Oh, that’s horseshit,” I said. “The local economy needs to make money off of tourism. You might not like it, but it’s the truth.”

“But they don’t have to make money off of overpriced real estate. A damn vacation cabin that sits empty half the damn year. Shit. The people coming in from outside of here? They don’t have to do that.”

“In my opinion — and this is just an outsider’s opinion to you — they’re bleeding a turnip that’s already been squeezed too many times.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I mean that they’ve kept squeezing the wrong poor people, and made the wrong rich people mad. And that’s one of the reasons why I came here. I’m here to take care of this mess.”

”The mess with your Jackie Gibson?”

“And the mess with yours. I think we need to start working together on my case. I think we need to abandon yours—”

I held up my hand, stopping him before he could object.

”I think if we work together to take my Jackie Gibson out…”

I paused for a second, thinking about how his Jackie was my Jackie. But I couldn’t think like that, because I still had to convince him.

“I think if we take care of Mr. Jackie Gibson — a rapist, a real estate tycoon, a thief — then you’ll see that most of your problems will go away. There’s more than enough money for us to split. I would pay you for your time.”

“What are you saying?”

“If you’ll help me take care of my problem, I’ll help you take care of yours — with a twist. I’ll pay you to make a target out of Dwayne instead of his wife. And that puts you off the hook with your Jackie.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“It would be the perfect crime — two Jackies, right? It looks like a case of mistaken identity, they have no idea if one person did it or two people did it, and … we could both get away with it.”

“I think we can get away just as easily with a mistaken identity situation with Mr. Jackie Gibson and Mr. Dwayne Earl Gibson. They both have the same last name.”

I paused. “Whatever he’s paying you, I’ll find a way to get you more. I need to take care of both of them. I need both of them gone.”

***

"I believe we have the same father, sir," I told the other stalker. I mentioned this while we were lying in wait.

"It took you that long?" After he said this, he laughed. He obviously wasn't amused. But it seemed like, somehow, he'd become more human to me.

I gave him a serious look, a no-bullshit-now promise. "Sir. If you know what it's like to be a Mullins, then you know very well that killing and being killed are in our DNA."

He said nothing, so I kept going.

"Mullins. Now, that's a family destined to kill each other. My great-grandfather — our great-grandfather, I should say. His mother was adopted. She had to be taken in by her aunt because the daddy — the aunt's brother, I mean — but after the daddy was shot in the face. Our great-grandfather, one of his sons died the same way. Shot in the face. And the kids went to live with my grandmother. It's always a sister who has to take them in. Always."

We were both silent after that. Finally, he nodded.

"A woman can take care of things, that's for sure," he said. "If you think we can get away with —"

"I know we can. We just have to change our strategy. And we have to work together. We have to get them to come out to the hunting cabin at the same time. Get one of them to park around back, even, so that the other one doesn't get suspicious. And then we make it look like an accident."

"Make it look like they both startled each other?"

"Exactly. Breaking and entering gone wrong, for both of them. And they're both greedy enough that they'll fall for it."

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"Well, he never was his brother's keeper. That's for sure."

The jangle of bells at the front door of the gas station meant another customer had come by for morning coffee.

The little cafe area was more crowded than ever. All of the ol' timers were here, just like always, but a younger element had flooded in today. They'd stopped by to pick up sausage biscuits before heading in to work, but instead of heading out quickly, they'd all lingered and said something before leaving.

"I knew he was a sack of shit, but his brother ... his cousin? Whatever he was, I had no idea he was that mean."

"Damn, it's an awful time of year for something like this to happen. It's never good, is it? But think of the wife and the kids. I know those kids are nearly grown, but ... It's an awful time of year, isn't it?"

Over the course of an hour, there must've been forty different people come in and comment on the double homicide up at the old Gibson place.

I sat near the windows, sipping my coffee and eating a Snoball. One of the older gentlemen tried to rope me into the conversation.

"You're living with Miss Linda up there, aren't you? I bet you don't even know about those nasty Gibsons. Not to say the other Gibsons are nasty. My mother's mother was a Gibson. But those two were bad characters."

Another older man cut in. "She's not from around here, but her daddy was, wasn't he? Linda's cousin's son, right?"

I smiled and nodded.

"You're from Kentucky, isn't that right?"

"Yessir," I said. "From the side with the rivers and those old antebellum mansions that are falling in. It’s a little different from this place. It's more beautiful here, what with the mountains."

I'd successfully steered the topic away from the Gibsons and I'd managed to make myself seem ignorant of all that was going on.

"You look a little tired, young lady," the first older man said.

"Oh, I was up all night," I said. "I work for a software company and I have to work on a big data-entry thing."

I could feel their interest waning.

"But I'm almost done. And it pays the bills, so I can't complain."

They smiled at that. I gave them time to pack up and leave, and then I did the same. It seemed like everyone in town — from the gas station to the liquor store to the Piggly Wiggly — knew about what had happened.

Or they thought they knew what had happened. Most people were eager to accept the obvious explanation, because of who had been involved.

My newfound brother wanted to get out of town after it happened. I told him that it was risky and too obvious. Meeting up, too, was risky and too obvious. I told him to bump into me on Wednesdays at Walmart, and that's precisely what we did.

"Bitch from the city," he said, when I accidentally backed into him. We were both pretending to look at boxes of cereal, as we'd agreed to do.

"Sir, I'm not from the city. I'm just from Kentucky."

He nodded, and didn't seem to have anything to say. We weren't going to talk about how we'd ambushed them, how we made sure their prints were on the weapons, how we made the scene look convincing, how we walked barefoot through the woods back to civilization.

But we needed to play along with the town's ongoing narrative. We were suddenly relegated to the part of bit players, but we had to do a convincing job. And I knew we were up to it.

"I heard about what happened up on the ridge. Two men had a fight and killed each other? I'd heard this place was supposed to be safe."

"Safe for visitors," he said. "I'm not sure it's safe for the people who live here."

"Hmm," I said. "Well, alright then. I'll keep that in mind."

I nodded once. It was a good-bye and an I'll see you. I finished buying my groceries and left the store.

***

It wasn't until a few days later that I had the courage to check on Jackie.

I showed up at her house with the customary pecan pie. Several other folks had left food as well, judging by the mess of tin foil on her dining room table.

"How are you doing?" I asked. "How is everyone taking it?"

The kids were sitting out back. I could see them through the kitchen window. Her daughter, surrounded by a passel of high school friends. Her son, sitting with one scrawny looking young man, one oversized pitbull, and one hand-rolled cigarette.

"Well, you know," Jackie said. "It is what it is. We'll have to get through it, somehow."

"Mmmmm," I said.

I didn't know what else to say.

“I never know what to say,” I said. “You know, when something like this happens.”

“It’s hard, isn’t it?”

“Sure is. Sure is. Jackie, I’ll say something to the kids before I go.”

“That’ll be fine.”

She got up from the table and walked me to the door. She thanked me for the pie.

“Pecan was alright, then?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Well, I’ll be thinking of you.” I started walking down the path beside the house. “Take good care of yourself.”

“Same to you. Thanks again,” Jackie said. “For everything. Vashti, listen. Before you head out — it might take a few weeks, but I’ll get you your money.”

I almost said something, but I nodded instead. That was enough.

Strange Birds

June 14, 2013

Tonight was the last night of Oongo. Oongo is the only big music festival within three hundred miles of us, and it's on a soy farm, but it's been massive for the past few years, so I begged Delia to come with me. I didn't have to beg very hard, but we had to scrounge up $500 to pay for the privilege of standing in mud (and, perhaps, pee) for seven hours.

Tonight, we went to see the headliner, a guy who is already a has-been. Our real purpose for standing at the Big Stage was to get closer to the Large Stage. Delia's favorite band, Smidgen, was playing there. Or DJing there. DJing at 1:30 in the morning, which meant that we'd probably have pretty good luck at getting close to the stage.

"Listen," she told me. "It's time to head over to the Large Stage."

I interrupted her. "Do you think they named these stages to be deliberately confusing? That way, they can force you to spend more time walking through the middle, past all the vendors? So that you'll have to spend more—"

"Of course. I personally hate that there's one called the Small Stage. Embarrassing. Imagine getting called to play Oongo, and they tell you, 'Yeah, we need you on the Small Stage at 3:45 on Thursday afternoon.'"

Before I could take up for any of the rising artists, because I'd actually seen a good synth-wave show at 4:00 on Friday, she pulled me to the far side of the crowd.

"Here. We can take this shortcut."

The shortcut looked a little bit like a drainage ditch. Because it was a drainage ditch. And I'd shudder to think about all the sewage in it, except for the fact that I'd probably already stepped on three turds in the past half-hour. (From humans or horses, I honestly don't know.)

Which was marginally better than the needles my mother thought I would step on.

So, anyhow, we slid through the ditch. It wasn't so bad, because when I got to the other side of the Big Muddy River, we were already in the other field.

"This is where Smidgen is playing?"
"Seems kind of empty, but I think so," I said. "Let's see if we can get closer."

But we didn't get within two-hundred feet of the stage before hitting the human blockade. A passel of people with glow-in-the-dark hula-hoops formed a parade in front of us. Hula- hooping at two in the morning. Exercising at two in the morning.

I rather liked standing there at two in the morning, but the thought of moving vigorously in circles after drinking vodka coolers made me feel dizzy. I almost sat on the ground right then and there, but I remembered our ultimate goal.

"Do you think we can just push through their conga line?"

"No," Delia said. She sighed. "It's sort of, like, sad house music. So it sounds better coming from a distance, anyway."

We stood there, listening to the echo of the sad-house-music-that-sounds-better-from-a-distance. It sounded quite lovely, actually, once the breeze picked up. I almost made a joke about how we were only catching a smidge of Smidgen, but ... it was too soothing to joke about.

The music wafted over to us, and the air cooled down, and it was a bit like sitting in a dark bedroom with a guy you like a lot. Saying nothing, but listening to sad music through some tinny earbuds.

"This would be kind of romantic," I said. "If we were here with a date." She nudged me. "They would agree with you."
And, of course, twenty feet away, there was a couple. Couple-ulating.

We left the show right around then because we needed to rehydrate. And because we'd seen enough genitalia to hold us over for a while. And then we stayed up until four in the morning, just talking about what we'd enjoyed most about the festival. And about life back home, and about how lucky we were to get to spend a weekend away from home.

And, somewhere around seven in the morning, I fell asleep.

February 23, 2010

I remember reading in a music magazine at the end of last year that we'd reached the end of an era. An era of what, exactly, I don't know. An era of The Strokes and those newspaper- wielding-street-urchin hats, I guess.

Tonight, I watched some of the Olympics. I like summer sports more than winter sports, but I usually watch the skaters.

I've only been ice skating twice. The first time, I went with an older cousin. About thirty seconds after I went out on the ice, they made the announcement that the Zamboni was coming out.

And I was on the far end of the rink, away from the little door. It took me three minutes to pick my way back to the far side. Everyone else had made it off the ice and an entire crowd assembled around the edge of the rink. They were all gawking at me.

I waddled over to my cousin. "Hey. Why didn't you come over to the side and pull me over the rail?"

"Pull you over the rail? Christ," he said. "You're eleven years old. Learn to figure out things for yourself. You should've skated backwards, back to the door."

"I don't know how to skate backwards! You're not strong enough, is what it is," I said. "You couldn't have picked me up."

“I’ll prove it, I can.”

We went back two days later. He managed to hoist me over the barrier — and I cut his arm with one of the blades.

We never went back.

Stuff like that makes me a little embarrassed. I’m a wild person. I’m an awkward person. But I’m not a bad person.

I don’t know if I’m a talented person, though. These skaters have trained since they were kids, but I haven’t ever really trained for anything. I’m average in so many ways, except for maybe appearance.

And I don’t mean that I’m above average. Anyway ...

I guess I wish I’d learned to dance or something. Or to play an instrument. As you can see from the skating incident, I’m very coordinated and I have great motor skills.

Hmmm. What else is going on? Nothing too unusual has happened lately. Except at work.

I work nights at ... a place. It’s not nefarious or anything; it’s just a boring retail job. Anyway, a woman came in a couple of days ago and tried to buy thirty-five dollars worth of stuff. Mostly candy, actually.

But she only had fifteen dollars. And when I told her she still owed us twenty, she lost it, but momentarily regained her ... not-so-cool cool.

“You know what? I’ll get you twenty. Just give me and my mouth ten minutes in the parking lot, and I’ll be back with it.”

And that’s exactly what she did.

“She brought me the money, so I rang her up,” I told one of my coworkers.

“Damn. I don’t want to think about how she pulled that off,” he said.

“Well, maybe she offered to do an errand for someone, or helped someone ... with their homework?”

It was the only thing I could think of, but he seemed unpersuaded.

“She said she was using her mouth, though.”

“Well,” I said. “Maybe it was homework for a speech class?”

“Sure it was,” he said. “Just ... go wash your hands, just to be on the safe side.” This is the sort of stuff that happens to me.

I wonder if something important will happen over the next few years ... I wonder what I’ll look back on, and what I’ll tell younger people about my life.

Or what I'll tell older people. Or any people. I feel like, someday, if I have the opportunity to reminisce over things ... Well, I’ll want to do it properly.

You hear people talk about living through a chapter in history, sometimes, and I wonder what sort of chapter will be written between now and 2015. And 2020.

That’s so far away. It’s strange to even think about it.

But I’d rather think about that than about my pre-calculus homework. Homework that’s due tomorrow. Homework that I’d better work on now.

Hmmm. Maybe someone would do it for me, for twenty dollars ...

September 10, 2015

There’s an eclipse coming later this month.

When I was younger, I liked to watch the stars at night. ... Of course I liked to watch the stars at night, because what other time would I watch them? But enough about that.

I would look for constellations, but for some reason, I could only manage to find the Big Dipper.

Now, when I look at the sky at night, I think about other people looking up at it. Maybe absurdly, I think about people on the other side of the world. People standing under the daytime sky.

There are so many bad things happening out there — always another crisis — so I like to think about happier things happening. Births, weddings, good food, good music. Great music. Great food.

And when I can't think about happier things actually happening, I think about things I've seen in movies. Bollywood movies, Wong Kar Wai movies, and slice-of-life stories.

Mmmmm. Especially films with cooking scenes. Any good movie is made immeasurably better when there's a cooking scene — or an eating scene.

I watched this international movie on the classic movie channel. It was on pretty late at night — normally, they show the sexier movies at two in the morning. This one wasn't really sexy, so much as ... different. "Arty" is a better descriptor.

There was a scene where they fed each other food, and it looked so good that I had to go out later in the week and try one of the chicken-based dishes the happy couple shared.

I found a restaurant with an online menu that listed the same dish — and it was in the next town over. Twenty minutes separated me from the object of my desire.

I sat down, ordered, and within a few minutes, I was tucking in. When I was about halfway through my plate, I heard a man scream.

I looked up. Two men ran out of the kitchen. They ran right past me. The one in front had a cutting board, which he was using as a shield. The one in the back had a knife. A very large knife.

And he chased the other guy around the tables at the front of the restaurant, and then looped back around to the back of the room. Several people got up and hurried out, but I stayed where I was. Finally — probably ten seconds later — a waitress grabbed my shoulder and forced me to stand, and we hurried out together.

“Is he going to stab him?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know why I asked you that. It was a bad question. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” she said. “This isn’t your fault. Or my fault. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

We stood there for a bit, together, both nodding. But then it seemed like I should leave. So I did. All of the customers left, getting into their cars, but the employees didn’t. They stood there, helplessly.

As I drove off, I turned back around and looked at them. I felt sad. I didn’t know what would happen for them, but I realized how lucky I was. I escaped unscathed. I didn’t even have to pay for the food, so, in hindsight, that was actually the best day to have dined with them.

One of my biggest regrets is that I didn’t think to bring the plate outside with me — another man did that, and I was immensely jealous of him. Which makes me feel a little selfish, even though I’m not the one who took the plate.

I wonder what he did with the plate. Did he take it back? It was a pretty nice plate.

It took me about an hour, but I decided that, even though the chicken was delicious, I wouldn't be going back. Their cook seemed to have more interest in chopping people than chopping food.

In the meantime, I've found other restaurants that I like better. The Chinese restaurant in our town, for instance, is my favorite restaurant in the world. The mei fun is especially nice.

Good grief, I'm so hungry right now. I'd better make dinner. Oh, who am I kidding? I'm going to go to the Chinese buffet.

October 31, 2012

Earlier this week, my friends took me to see the Rocky Horror Picture Show. The theater wouldn't let us bring toast, but we got to bring everything else.

I'm still picking rice out of my hair.

I don't really have big plans for tonight. I was going to dress up in a Twin Peaks-themed outfit. I have a chevron-patterned skirt, so I decided to be a Sexy Red Room.

But I don't know anyone who's actually having a party-party tonight, so I'll probably just put on my outfit, take a bunch of pictures, post the best one, and then change into pajamas.

Well, I'll probably change into pajamas before posting. But that's the plan.

I wonder how many other people are doing that — putting on a costume for five minutes and then ripping it off after making a post about it. Probably lots of us.

With any luck, I'll be in my pajamas by 9:00.

... And I'm back, two hours later. It's 9:50. I've been outside for the past half-hour, because someone burned a car in my neighbor's front yard.

The whole neighborhood gathered to watch. One of my neighbors and her husband walked past me, gossiping about who the neighbor was, and what kind of stuff he got up to.

"That's quite the trick," the woman said.

"Well, no one ever said that he turns treats," the man snickered.

And they both walked off, laughing. They're in their fifties, though, so I'm inclined to write off their humor as the product of having a sense of humor that's been dulled by settling into middle age.

I went back inside, naturally, because I didn't see anything and I didn't know anything. But I imagine the whole neighborhood will have it sorted out by the time I wake up tomorrow.

This isn't the first time this has happened — it just happened to a different person, back then.

It was about a year ago, when one of the neighbors cheated on his wife. She set his truck on fire. I remember the big scramble that happened that night.

Within a few weeks, they'd moved out of their house. Another family bought it. You hardly ever see them, except for when they get in the pool in their backyard.

(The new family's mother looked like the last dad's girlfriend, but that's speculation on my part. Very thoroughly-considered speculation, though.)

It's a little late in the season for swimming. Even though the days are all warm and sunny, the leaves are falling off of the trees. It's very ... pumpkin-spicy outside.

It’s nearly midnight now, so I’d better go to sleep — before I burn out. (Har, har.)

March 28, 2016

Last night, George and I went out to eat. We were out late because we had to meet up after he left work. By the time we got there, the restaurant wasn’t full, but it was surprisingly busy.

The table next to us at Sunny’s, our local knockoff version of Steak n Shake, was engaged in a scintillating conversation:

“This summer, I’ve gotta learn how to mow that diamond pattern into the yard. Gonna start doing a different diagonal pattern, to make the yard look more ...”

George reached over and squeezed my hand. “There’s nothing romantic about living right outside of one of the most boring cities in the whole expanse of the southern U.S.”

“We live outside of Nashville and you really think that there’s nothing excit—”

“Nope.”

“Damn,” I said. “Be bitter about it.”

But I was also bitter about it, of course. There’s not a lot going on anymore, especially as some of our (supposedly) twenty-something friends are settling into middle-middle age.

“Did I tell you Delia is having a baby?”

“*Jeeez*. Y’all are only twenty-three. I—”

“Twenty-two,” I said. “Twenty-two. You’re twenty-three. I think that we’re still really young, but it seems like half of the people in our class have either gotten married or had kids.”

George said nothing.

“I couldn’t find anyone to have kids with, even if I wanted to have 'em.”

He sipped his coffee. “You’re one of these people who — you’re very alluring, in an ... an eccentric way. And don’t get mad.”

“I’m not mad,” I said. “I agree with you.”

“... but you’re not girlfriend material.”

“I know,” I said. “If I’d been a man, I would be—”

“Drowning in it. Yeah.”

“Well, that’s not how I would have said it, but ...” I paused. I had to seriously evaluate myself before I could say what I wanted to say.

“I think that I have qualities that would make me a desirable boyfriend. Hard-working, responsible, serious-but-good-humored. And kind of a strong jaw, too, I think. I think I’m sort of handsome, even, but I’m not gorgeous. I would be a good boyfriend, but ... I don’t really want to be somebody’s wife.”

“And I don’t want you to be, either. I like coming here and hanging out with you.”

George and I would always be friends, I hoped. At that very moment, I hoped that I’d never lose him. Even though he dates girls and guys, I knew he and I weren’t (and aren’t) a good romantic match. But we’re perfect friends.

And whoever he ends up with, I hope they won’t take him far away from me. He’s too much of a ... He’s a wall for me. I can bounce ideas off of him, day in and day out. And he’s so solid.

I resumed our conversation. “Do you feel upset when you think about how many people our age are getting married?”

“A little bit. I don’t want to get married, either, but—”
“You wonder why all these other people are doing it. Like, what do they have that we don’t?”

“Yeah. Except I already know the answers to that — lots of money, susceptibility to peer pressure, family connections, and lower standards.”

“George! Is that really fair?”

“Fair? It doesn’t matter if it’s fair — it’s just the truth.”

“For some people. But I think some people can make it work. Plenty of folks are trying to make it work.”

We started to eat our burgers then, and by the time we were done, we were nearly the only ones left in the restaurant.

We gave our waitress a big tip, in case she overheard our conversation and thought we were jealous or vindictive. Gotta maintain a solid reputation.

It’s time for tonight’s dinner. I have no idea what to eat. But after I eat, I’m going to start filling out some forms for grad school. That’s a big step for me — and hopefully a step in the right direction.

May 7, 2018

I’ve fallen in love with — maybe not “in love,” per se, but into a deeper level of liking — a guy from Kazakhstan. My phone autocorrects it to Kraftwerk, for some unfathomable reason. Every time I send a text about him, my friends have asked what I’m talking about.

“A guy from Kraftwerk?” Nora says. “Like, you have a crush on an old man in a band?”

“No,” I typed. “I’m talking about Kazakhstan. The country.”

“Where’s he from?”

“I just told you.”

“No, goofy. I’m asking where he’s from — is he from your college? From a class or a club? Or a restaurant? Or did you meet him online?”

I met him at an on-campus event. He’s another grad student. He’s twenty-seven, never been married, six feet tall, and very perceptive. I sent all of this back to her.

“Well, good luck to you. Have you been on a date yet?”

“No. I just have his phone number. And we text a bit, here and there.”

“Then call him.”

“What? And talk on the phone?”

“What else do you use a phone for?”

“Texting, reading emails, admiring my own posts on —”

“Whatever. I get it. You’re not ready to actually talk to him.”

And I wasn’t. I mean, I’m still not.

We talk through text, though, and when we run into each other on campus.

The other day, someone came over and interrupted us while we were talking.

“I’ve heard about what’s happening in your country,” they said. “I’m sorry.”

After they walked far enough away, I turned to him. “What exactly is happening in your country?”

“Nothing,” he said. “That professor just says that to all of the international students who are Muslim.”

I gave him a look that (I hope) conveyed knowingness and all of that. He smiled, then. And then I smiled.

Right now, I’m doing research on his homeland. The first thing I researched was the food.

Delicious meat, from the looks of it. Good thing I’m not vegetarian. (Although I certainly respect vegetarians, I’ve never been able to walk that path.)

I wonder how he copes with missing home. I wonder if he’s planning on staying here after school, or if he's eager to head back to his family and his friends.

Why am I sitting here wondering about someone else’s future when I have plenty of open- ended questions about my own future?

I suppose it’s easier to think about someone else, and about what they should do, than to think about your own circumstances.

Maybe I should put my pen down ... and just think about my own stuff for a little while. Not to write about other people — not today, anyhow — but to start living my own story.

September 20, 2017

We’re visiting the mountains this week. We’re staying in the forest, in a cabin that’s been dropped in between two thick groves of trees.

All of the greenery made me remember a man who worked with my mom — a man who claimed he ate poison ivy as a kid so that he could become immune to it. I don’t know

whether it works or not; I'm too afraid to try it. Especially while I'm out alone in the woods.

I wouldn't recommend it, anyway. As someone who only eats salads that have a zesty dressing on them, I can't imagine eating raw-salad-on-the-vine.

There's something about experiencing nostalgia while sitting near a stream that runs through a massive forest. A forest that people have lived in for thousands of years.

I can't quit thinking about people. I can't quit thinking about all of our relatives back home, even though we're only a few hours away.

My grandmother had a stroke a few months ago. I bought her a fidget spinner, because I thought it would make her feel good to have something to occupy her hands. I don't know if it helps, but it gives her something to ... something else to focus on.

I have this feeling that the shot clock is always running, and that there are going to be People After, the same way there have been People Before. Sometimes it's an overwhelming thought. Other times, it's soothing.

Right now, I want to be soothed. I'm going to go wade in the stream, because I want to be around — within — a permanent thing.

June 17, 2016

The neighbor's rooster was at it again this morning.

I meant to wake up at 7:30 — that's sleeping in, for me. But the rooster's wake-up call came around 6:45, and he didn't stop until around 7:00, so I decided to get up early and get ready for brunch. I don't normally "do" brunch, but this was a special occasion.

Our graduating class decided to have a brunch meeting today, because our high school reunion is tomorrow night at Kilgore Country Club. They — the planning committee —

wanted to have daytime and nighttime events, just in case some folks could only swing Friday morning or Saturday night. We haven't even been out of school for five years, but they're throwing a big one. (A big two, I guess — the brunch event drew a huge crowd.)

They'd planned on having an Olympics-themed celebration. Well, it's really more of a gold- themed affair. Gold medals, material success, flaunting wealth, etc.

Today's events, however, proved that money isn't the only way to attain happiness.

When I walked into the restaurant/watering hole, my friends were already tucking in. I walked over to them, pulled out a chair, and sat down. Before I could ask whether or not they were serving mimosas, I heard the newly-christened Mrs. Ashley-Fae McQuistion — she was a Fairbanks, back before 2015 — get into it with Cora Bailey.

I was friends — sort of, in a weekday-only, never-at-the-same-parties kind of way — with Nora Bailey. Nora is Cora's twin, but I didn't see Nora come rushing to her sister's defense. (As it turned out, Nora is in Hawaii.)

I didn't even try to hide my interest in their argument — I turned the chair around to face them. They were only two tables away, so I had a front-row seat.

Ashley-Fae scowled at Cora. "I'm not done with you yet. Remember when you fell down the stairs? That day, I —"

"What? What did you do? You didn't push me. I just fell." "I told ..." Ashley-Fae started to giggle. "I said ..."
"I guess you told people that I'd tried to hurt my—" "Nope. I told them you'd tried to get rid of your baby."

I'm pro-choice. I'm all about a woman's right to make her own choices. One of my choices is to not let someone get away with petty things, especially if they involve

dishonesty, or public humiliation, or unnecessary gossip. And, in that very moment, my instant choice was to shove it all back in Ashley-Fae's face.

So I did. I never got in any (physical) fights in school, so I wasn't sure how this worked. But I rushed over to her table and I picked up the (plastic! not glass!) plate — and I smashed it over her head. Of course it still had food on it — all of the food and the sauce rained down onto her jacket and her lap.

She had something — hollandaise sauce? — in her eyes, so it might not have been the most fair fight. But she tried to smack at me (and missed) three times before they dragged her off to the restroom.

"Before you leave, why don't you tell us what's really good?" Cora shouted. She looked like she was going to cry, or to scream, or to ... laugh. And she did.

She started giggling and I joined in, too — although mine was more of a nervous laugh. I felt like I'd done too much.

I turned back to my table. Delia was smiling. George was smiling. Lots of folks were laughing. The whole room seemed more lively. It wasn't one of those "everyone applauded" scenarios; that isn't what I'm talking about. I just think that ... everyone kind of perked up at the prospect of a fight. Most of us hadn't seen an honest-to-goodness full-on fight since we'd graduated. People were giggling, whispering, or grinning in our direction. The only people who actually looked upset were the reunion organizers.

Of course, they told our group to leave. And so we did — at least seven of us, laughing at the mess I'd made.

I'll probably never be able to go back to that place — but it seems like a fair trade off.

September 21, 2018

My quasi-boyfriend and I went out to eat tonight. We went to the drive-in. They're open until October 15th this year — and since it feels like we're still in the middle of summer, we're taking advantage of the perfect weather. Everyone in town is — and I mean, everyone.

A drunk man wandered past our picnic table and collapsed near the back of the building. One of the stray dogs — there are several strays that hang around, waiting for people to drop ice cream or a burger — walked over to him and started licking his face.

The man started licking back.

I turned back to Ali, embarrassed by the man's behavior. "Don't you think ... does it ever bother you, the way people act around here?"

"What do you mean?"

"The way people are—"

"Publicly drunk? That happens everywhere."

"What I mean is," I said, pausing, gathering my thoughts. "You decided to come here. Thousands of miles from home. And you came here, out of all the places in the world. But I was born here. Well, thirty miles up the road, so—"

"I think if you really wanted to leave, you would've already done it." He smiled. "I think you will probably still leave, eventually. You could be happy somewhere else. But I think you will always want to come back."

"You certainly get some free entertainment here," I said, pointing to the man. He'd managed to stand up, but he fumbled with his keys. I was a bit worried that he'd try to get in one of the many trucks in the parking lot — his own or someone else's. Another man came over and intervened. He walked the man to one of the other picnic tables and sat

with him, speaking calmly. I envied his sense of ... what to do when things were completely out of sorts.

“I feel like ...” Ali stopped, and then smiled. “You could come back thirty years later and you would still know this place. You would just know it. It is imprinted on you.”

“Is it?”

He laughed. “It is. It’s a part of you—the place and the people. You’re the one facing the parking lot. I’m the one looking down at the river.”

“Yes,” I said. “But I really like looking at the people. And the land. Looking at the place itself.”

“This is your home,” he said. “It’s what you know.”

“Do you feel homesick tonight?” I asked. I felt sorry for not having asked about that until that moment.

He told me that he didn’t, but he said he’s starting to feel the pressure of finding something to do after graduate school. His brother is a basketball coach, and he's worked with a couple of players on the national team. His brother asked if he wanted to get into running stats for the team, or helping in recruiting, doing translating work, or doing something similarly administrative.

“What would that involve?” I asked. “And don’t they hire, like, the best of the best to do that kind of work?”

“Are you saying that I’m not the best of the best?”

I laughed. “Sorry—that was supposed to be a compliment.”

He smiled. “Alexi told me that you really like basketball.”

I paused. “Who, me?”

I felt a little twinge. Not a sad twinge, but a ... twinge of wabi-sabi.

“You. Yes, he told me that you—”

“I’m a huge basketball fan,” I said. I wanted to tell him more, but I needed to buy some time. “Let me finish this sandwich and ... let me finish this, and I promise I’ll tell you more.”

February 25, 2011

Basketball isn’t as much fun as it used to be. I mean, I still enjoy going to games. I still enjoy being in and around the crowd. I still enjoy watching. I even enjoy watching NBA games — probably more than I enjoy watching college games.

And I like taking pictures for the school paper — though we certainly have better photographers. I still hesitate when it comes to getting down on the edge of the court, especially toward the end of a tight game. But they’ve asked me to help out, so I do.

It’s just too different now.

I remember back when I played in middle school — *phewww*. It’s almost painful to think about. I was heavier and slower than all of the other players, but I could aim and I could shoot. And I would always try my best.

I was never as good as Delia, when it came to scoring. She’s good at driving to the basket, and she’s good at weaving in between the players guarding her. She’s very skilled on a technical level. But I’ve been very good at watching other people, following their moves, figuring out plays, and planning what the team should do next. Not just what one player should do — but how the whole team could work together to come up with better plays.

I would almost consider becoming a team manager, or something like that, but I ... I don't feel like anyone would take my opinions seriously.

It doesn't make me sad — what makes me aggravated is my lack of confidence in myself. In the meantime, I'm going to keep taking pictures and studying the game.

I already know how to play, but I want to learn even more rules. I want to learn the things I can't afford not to know — and I want to learn which rules can be broken.

August 28, 2011

Our house isn't exactly new — it's not on a historic register or anything like that, but it was probably built in the fifties.

The stuff in the house is pretty old, too. Two days ago, I got locked in. Not locked out — locked in. The knob made a noise halfway between a groan and a growl, like an old dog trapped in a shed.

I kept twisting the knob, but it wouldn't move. I was trapped. I ended up climbing out one of the back windows. When I went around and tried to unlock the door later, it worked.

The door only sticks from the inside — which makes me wonder if someone tried to trap a Victorian-era woman here. Like in The Yellow Wallpaper. I pictured her tugging on the doorknob with some guy standing on the other side, laughing, playing with a cigarette.

Anyway, I hauled out our old toolkit and I took the knob apart.

I removed the indoor knob, the outdoor knob, and then that long thing in the middle — I pulled them out of the door and set them to the side. I cleaned it with a mixture of olive oil and water, and put everything back together, and checked to see if it would work. It did.

I wonder if maybe I should go into a trade instead of going to a college. Maybe I could do both?

Speaking of practical people: this semester, I have class with Nora. She's friends with Delia. Sort of — they went to the same elementary school and they got to know each other back then.

She's very, very cool. She can fix stuff on cars and all sorts of mechanical-type stuff. She used to take dance classes and play basketball. (When I told her that I used to play, but had quit when I felt like I was bringing the rest of the team down, she told me that I had to do what was right for me. She seems like she gets me.) She has a twin sister. As a child, she lived in Spain for a year or two — military brat and all that. She's the stereotypical cool girl.

She's also nice, despite being so much cooler than the rest of us. She goes down the road to Nashville all the time — well, we all do, seeing as it's so close. But she goes to all these different concerts. Last month, she went to see a semi-local band that's apparently been making waves in Europe.

I told her that I didn't have much exposure to them, other than having heard one of their songs in passing. But, I said, I liked The Strokes and Phoenix and The White Stripes, so maybe I would be into their stuff.

"Mmmmm, you should listen to their newest album. Oh, and you should listen to Because of The Times," she said. "Ah, man. You really think The Strokes are gonna make another good album? Oooh. I bet you liked the last one."

"What's bad about it?" I asked.

"Nothing — it's just that the one before that was better."

I didn't want to argue with her — also, I couldn't argue with her on that. While we were working on our group project, we talked about some other songs.

"I can't think of a Phoenix song that I don't like," Nora said.

"That's because you probably only know three Phoenix songs," I said. I laughed, but I was a little nervous. I knew she was opinionated about music, but she seemed to take the jab in stride.

"'Long Distance Call' — that's a good one," she said.

"'Too Young' is my favorite," I said. "*United* is a good album."

"You like Phoenix?" Will said, butting in. "You're the last person who I thought would like French things."

I rolled my eyes. "I might not be so quick to forgive the French for all the land-grabbing in Morocco. And everywhere else, too. But I have to admit that they have good music. Because of the funk samples, mostly. But the music is good."

"Phoenix, Daft Punk, Air," Will said.

"All of those are just so good," Nora said. "Have you seen *Lost In Translation*?"

I let Will and Nora talk about the movie while I got back to drawing up plans for our project. I'm not sure what we'll end up doing — but I'm glad that I'll get some good music recommendations along the way. And that I'll have some cool good people to be around.

July 18, 2018

My cousin came to visit after my grandmother died. My grandmother wasn't her grandmother — we just have the same great-grandmother. Even so, she knew that it would help to have family nearby.

We sat on the front porch. I didn't know what to say. It felt like my heart and my mind — not that they'd been emptied, but that something important had been drained out of me.

Everything else was there. Everything else was working. But the thing that was missing tugged at me and made it where I couldn't speak.

"Look. A cardinal. Over there on the fence. Your grandmother was a lot like a cardinal," she said. "She was beautiful. She stood out wherever she went."

"Yes. I'm a lot like a hummingbird," I said. "I'm beginning to realize I can't stick with one thing for very long."

I hesitated before adding, "You're probably a hummingbird, too."

She laughed. "Girl, I don't know what we are, but we're both strange birds." I smiled. I'm glad that I still have someone to be strange with.

The First Two Were Free

The day the first volcano erupted — about a month before the third solar eclipse, about six months before the seventy-seventh tornado — was the day the old world officially ended.

Foolishly, I thought we would all die quickly. But we survived — some of us. Some of us went on living. And even though the old world died, a new one was born … or created for us.

We'd always had problems in this part of the state, in this part of the country. Our weather was always unrelenting. We had humid summers, muddy springs, and frigid winters. We were burdened with Indiana-type winters, Oklahoma-style tornadoes, and humidity that seemed more like something you'd find in Georgia or a Gulf State. The world always seemed wet. Hot-wet in the summer, gross-wet in the spring, and slushy in the wintertime. It got to the point that a hailstorm was a welcome break from all of the rain and snow.

So in a fitting circumstance — and in an almost Biblical fashion — the first problems we noticed as being worse than usual were the big floods. This made sense, at the time. The whole region was full of rivers and lakes, and nearly all of these emptied into the Mississippi River. Even the sag pond that formed after the First Great Earthquake was born out of the waters of the Mississippi.

But the back-to-back floods were the first big sign, and I was kicking myself that I didn't think much about this before all of the really bad things started happening. I didn't think about the peculiarity of living in a world where bad things happened.

I just thought that misery was a part of life.

A few years before it got really bad, the farmers lost most of their crops in a big flood. That was the day they blew the levee, slightly upriver from us. Instead of worrying about the corn fields and the tobacco patches, I was more concerned about the safety of the people — the people upstream, the people who had already lost their homes, the people who had already drowned. I didn't realize that every subsequent storm would take more and more land, barns, horses, houses, people.

There were so many storms, and so many different types of storms. The next big thing after the floods, of course, was the spate of tornados. Rain and wind — we couldn't catch a break. We had several big ones in a row, every two years or so, until one decimated my hometown. A wall of other people's stuff — wooden beams and wood chips, shredded rugs, deflated basketballs, vintage cookbooks, bloated photo albums, full-sized trampolines, and cardboard boxes full of nothing and everything — rained down on our town. Our stuff rained down on another town, and so on and so forth, until two or three small towns were nearly wiped off the map, save for the debris fields and piles of bricks.

A year later, another bad one hit a town on the other side of the river, and it destroyed their town. By that point, I was used to seeing entire communities reduced to fragments. Yet I still gave in to foolish thinking. The illusion of safety was more comfortable than realizing I was right to be afraid. Between the floods and the heatwaves and the tornadoes, I was still optimistic. I thought maybe things would stay rough, but I didn't think things would get worse.

Things were already tough around here, so the idea of things getting worse seemed almost unfathomable. My stomach still hurt when I watched neighbors buying and selling drugs, or screaming at their kids, or trying to steal catalytic converters off of ugly little Toyotas with dented bumpers, but I decided those were just the normal byproducts of living — and I should be grateful that life was mostly normal, even on a 110-degree day,

even on a day where the wind reached 60 or 70 miles an hour, even when the thunder rolled without stopping.

Things started to improve, I thought, when the second eclipse passed through our area. You see, we had two back-to-back total eclipses, just a few years apart. Most people thought this was significant, whether they thought it was a miracle or an omen. Being naive, I thought that the first eclipse might be the harbinger of doom, while the second one would undo the influence of the first. I wasn't superstitious, but I wanted to find a way to explain why our part of the country was marked. Besides, I really enjoyed the eclipses. The way I saw it, both of these eclipses were free shows — and I'd have to pay to travel to see a third one, or so I thought. I might as well enjoy the cheap entertainment, if a big, free event was coming to town.

They say there's no such thing as a free lunch. And while I really don't blame the eclipses for being the source of our problems, I realize now that people were beginning to notice that we lived in an odd place, where odd things seemed to show up in a cyclical pattern. While the arrival of the second eclipse made me feel like we might begin to know peace again, other people felt uneasy. I really thought that this would mark the end of everything wild, that the planets would get back out of retrograde, that life would return to normal.

But then the big earthquake hit, and then the two major forest fires happened, and then I knew that it was all getting worse. When a couple of my friends told me that the national recreation area was burning, and that the Mark Twain National Forest was also burning, I felt a tightness in my chest. The second fire, the bigger one, was spreading into southern Illinois. North of us, of course, but it hurt to think about the burning forests. I worried about the people camping in the forest, about the birds living near the trickling waterfalls, about the bears that supposedly came over from Missouri to visit the forests. But I scarcely had time to keep up with the news of the forest fires, because I had to start paying attention to the large earthquakes. The aftershocks wouldn't subside.

After the fourth aftershock, a farmer reported a cone cropping up in his field. I didn't want to believe it, but everyone said it was true. It was really happening. I hurriedly added *Parícutin Mexico volcano* to my list of things to search up, to read about. I remembered the name of this particular volcano — the volcano born in the farmer's field in Mexico, the volcano that was born almost a hundred years ago exactly — because they'd made us read a picture book about it way back in elementary school. At the time, I thought it was the neatest thing.

But now that we were living that same experience, my heart raced. I was terrified. I felt like I was the one that was burning. I could feel lava churning in my stomach.

About three months after the worst of the aftershocks, after the Fifth Great Flood, after the Fourth Big Tornado, and after the earliest volcanic activity, we were told that we would need to pack up and evacuate. They — the government officials — were worried about the nuclear plant, even though it had been decommissioned decades ago. The experience reminded me of the ghost town over near St. Louis — the town that it wasn't even safe to visit, because of all of the contaminants still in the ground.

They told us to leave, but some of us — lots of us — couldn't afford to leave. We didn't have anywhere else to go. Other people were too stubborn to leave. And other people thought the authorities were overreacting. For one reason or another, I stayed. I reasoned that life could be awful anywhere else, and I resigned myself to a familiar life in what they were calling the exclusion zone.

I didn't expect the government to help out, not really, because the president was a Republican, the governors were nearly all Republicans, and the senators and representatives — who had fled to border towns — were all uber-conservative capitalists,

all fifteen or twenty of them. They knew that there wasn't any hope for industry here. I didn’t want to be abandoned, but I counted on it happening.

But I still cried when I saw the words *Midsouth Exclusion Zone (formerly part of Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee)* on Wikipedia. I cried knowing that I was reading about my own homeland. I wondered if perhaps people in stateless nations felt this way. I wondered if they felt like crying, living in a familiar place with an unfamiliar name.

But I lived in The MEZ now. MEZ reminded me of Oz. And it might as well have been. When I felt really despondent, I thought of the unique areas that made up the world of Oz. None seemed as bleak as our own — so I quit thinking about that sunshine-y stuff.

From time to time, to feel better, I imagined Neptune and Uranus. I’d heard that it rained diamonds on those planets. I hoped that our luck would turn, and that we might be sent some precious minerals. I didn’t count on it, but I was beginning to think that anything was possible.

About a year into our trauma, I realized we were being watched by outsiders.

I watched helicopters circle overhead, and I realized these choppers didn’t look like the Chinooks or the Blackhawks that flew over from Fort Campbell — the kinds of helicopters that flew over in the War on Terror era, the kind that flew over in the 2020s, the kind that flew over just a few hours ago. The military base was just a hair outside of the zone, but they checked in on us all the time, just to make sure we weren’t causing too much trouble.

Once, one of the military helicopters flew so low over my garden-that-became-my-subsistence-farm that I started panicking. I realized he was trying to figure out what I was growing, from my potato rows to my lettuce to my tiny tobacco

patch. I received a letter in the mail a week later, and I thought I'd been cited for growing something on toxic soil. Instead, there was a packet of tomato seeds.

"These always grow. No one has had trouble getting these to grow, so long as you can keep the green worms off of them. I've never had a plant fail yet. Good luck to you and yours."

Me and mine. I realized it had been two years since I'd left the MEZ. I would send letters to the postal decontamination center, and I picked up my mail once a month, and I always had letters from my family on the outside. To this day, they keep begging me to leave. But I'm too used to it to leave. When the first bird flu epidemic hit, we weren't spared. When the second bird flu epidemic arrived, we fared better, because we didn't have herds or birds. Animals had forsaken our land and our airspaces, and we avoided the worst of the trauma.

The only good thing that's happened — if you can call it a good thing — is that when the Marburg Pandemic hit, and over half of the country was infected, we only had two cases. Both of those people were known for leaving the zone every so often, for work in medical testing, and when they tried to return, they were eliminated at the border crossing.

It sounds dystopian, but it's really just euphemistic. *Eliminated*. A border guard shot them both. And even though they passed away on the outside, they were listed as Exclusion Zone residents, originally from Kentucky. I didn't bother looking into it beyond that, because I was worried I might recognize their names, being a former Kentuckian.

It's terrible to say it, but I always had a hard time reading "Midsouth Exclusion Zone East, formerly part of Kentucky" in someone's obituary. "Midsouth Exclusion Zone

North, formerly part of Illinois" seemed to roll off the tongue more easily. I could imagine it happening to someone else, but not to me.

For days after those two men were shot, people were buzzing about why the two of them wanted to try to sneak back in, knowing that they were ill. Someone said the federal government offered to pay their families a lot of money, if they'd come in and make us all sick and kill us off — finally. But that didn't make sense, because their families also lived in the MEZ. Surely they didn't want to make their own family ill? But that's when I realized they probably wanted to be home with their children, to have their mothers press cold rags to their foreheads, to hold hands one last time with their wives or girlfriends or side chicks. They just wanted to be back home with someone familiar.

Of course, a third possibility reared its head. My elderly neighbor — who planned to live and die in the zone — and I had both discussed this, and we'd both come to believe the third option: that if someone wanted to come back to the MEZ, knowing how awful it was, that the outer world must be even worse.

I was taken aback by the fact that people would pay money to catch a helicopter ride to come watch us lost folks, to gawk at our lost towns. I was ashamed that I had ever wanted to go see Plymouth, out on Montserrat, because I wanted to get cool photos of a buried town. I wondered how many people had been buried. I felt ashamed to realize that I'd never thought of that before, even though I remembered that people had always died during hurricanes and tornadoes and earthquakes.

So every fresh eruption set me on edge. Even though the nearest of the two rifts — the geyser and the great volcano, our very own Scyla and Charybdis — was sixty-five miles away, I didn't want to spend my days looking at ash clouds. I'd cleaned ashes off

my porch before and wondered if, someday, there would be an eruption that ended everything: the tourism industry, the MEZ, our lives.

I liked the idea of being a tourist, way back in the past. I wondered if I could get over to the St. Francois Mountains, which were the oldest mountains in the country — or at least I thought they were. I was pretty sure they were within the MEZ, which hadn't expanded or shrunk. The idea was to keep our world contained — and that by keeping it contained, mining could continue, fracking could continue, and so on and so forth. We were expendable, but our resources weren't.

We lived in a mineral rich area — and our minerals had been an asset for decades. My grandfather and great-uncles had been miners. Along with the mines, of course, there were caves in Kentucky filled with glittering stalactites, and there were beautiful pink rocks over in Missouri.

I had always wanted to see the Elephant Rocks, even though I'd never been. The thing was, you didn't have to show proof-of-ID as a MEZ resident, but it was so hard to travel — because we were constantly getting warnings about possible derechos, possible dust storms, possible floods, and possible earthquakes.

"They're saying that people who want to leave the MEZ will have to spend eight weeks in quarantine, just to be sure —" one of my neighbors said. She lived two or three miles up the road, but I would run into her when I went to collect mail or firewood.

As she was speaking, another neighbor cut her off. "That's horseshit. Besides, I don't want to travel outside, anyway. I've thought about going down to The Caves to visit. Or maybe to live there. It might be safer underground."

"What about earthquakes?" I asked.

“Well,” he said. “What about everything else?”

In spite of his thoughts about the caves being safer than the mountains, I decided I would make the trek out to the Elephants.

The truth is, something major spurred my decision — the sinkhole at the western edge of the MEZ.

The MEZ seemed to be expanding. The thought that it couldn’t be contained was fearsome, and it inspired the government to devise a plan for handling a growing problem. The Geological Survey would begin assessing the potential for “catastrophic border events” — and they needed about a year to do this. We were told that the MEZ would be roped off, and that we would all be forced to leave — to quarantine for eight weeks and to eventually reintegrate into American society.

“They just need more workers out in the fields,” someone hissed. “They want cheap labor. They don’t care about us.”

I could see that, regardless of politics or morality or ethics, this was probably an accurate assessment. We were only being moved because there was a better use for us elsewhere.

Within a few days of the announcement that we’d need to clear out, we were given a second notice. We were told that we would all be automatically allocated to the only two states who would accept MEZ refugees. Florida and Texas.

My heart raced. I didn’t want to go to either of those places. And we didn’t have a choice — we would be sorted, lottery-style, without any accounting for our preferences. I began panicking — until I remembered the St. Francois Mountains.

I could hide in the mountains. I thought of the fossils and the rocks and the granite, which had weathered one billion years of hardship. The mountains were quiet. The mountains were vacant. The mountains were the same as they were twenty years ago, and the same as they were in the hundreds of millions of years before that. I could make a home in that place, I reasoned. A place that could weather every storm and still stand. This unyielding place would provide for me, somehow. I could let the night blanket me, envelope me, shroud me and the mountains.

I could make a home — or a fossil — up in the mountains. I could see myself, cradled there. I'd wedge myself in between a nest of rocks, and I would find a place to rest my brain and my bones.

Lady Quijote

I should have blocked Sally Alonso's number after our second or third phone call. I didn't, and now I'm kicking myself. Just looking at her name makes me feel sick.

We met after she found me on 23andMe, in her dogged pursuit of members of the Alonso family — the extended family, which had scattered and sprawled all over west Texas and New Mexico.

Sally was consumed with her Spanish heritage — she was the *Oñate's foot debacle* come to life, and it just so happened that I had inherited responsibility for her. She was the Spanish foot that I had to bear, a third foot that I had to drag behind me, because I was one of the only cousins willing to talk to her. And I *was* exceedingly tolerant. I would let her kick up dust here and there — even when it got all over me.

But I wouldn't let her trample me. I couldn't let her put her foot on my neck.

We had a shared interest in environmentalism and animals, and that made our early conversations tolerable. My husband and I were trying to embrace sustainability and clean energy, and we'd come to install a small-scale wind farm on the open flatlands at the back of our ranch. The Ramos family, my family, didn't have a big ranch. But it was a ranch all the same. We were proud of our land, proud of the place we cared for. It was a part of how we saw ourselves.

It's hard for me to describe Sally Alonso, because it's difficult to sound fair. Even the most charitable description seems cruel. How can I describe her without sounding like *I'm* the villain?

Throughout the day, Sally took time to burden me with endless texts — *Have you checked out that bunny tale recipe yet? Tell me if you like it!* — that I would answer with half-hearted interest.

No, Sally — but they look really tasty! I knew that I wouldn't bake those cookies, or come to her house to pick up zucchini, or watch the documentaries she recommended, but I had to placate her. I had to run interference on Sally's behalf, to cradle her feelings, to keep them from crumbling like shortbread.

I felt guilty about all of my short answers, but I knew how Sally could be. I knew how she would react if I didn't like the recipe. She was someone who had a rather clueless enthusiasm about things that didn't necessarily matter — or mirror reality — for the rest of us.

It wasn't a simple thing, like mere ignorance about the true costs of running a farm, or a lack of understanding factual information. It wasn't a lack of access to the facts, or a simple *misunderstanding* of the facts, or anything straightforward like that. It was that Sally had convinced herself that her ideas were correct, that her values were more altruistic than yours. Sally thought she was full-hearted, and maybe she was, but she was also big-headed.

It sounds cruel, but it's true. Sally Alonso was stubborn. She would have her things her way on *your* land. So when I told her about our new solar panels, she lost it. Sally despised solar farms, which she believed led birds to get distracted and plummet to their deaths. She saw a wall of solar panels as a glittering avian cemetery.

I tried to reason with her, of course, to get her to see that the risks were low and that none of our grazing cattle would be harmed. The windmills and the solar farm

would be off in their own area, away from people and animals. Away from any trees, even, because we only had one juniper tree. No one could possibly get hurt.

"We did months of research before deciding to buy some solar panels," I told her. "We still haven't installed them, but it's the right thing for us."

"Oh, I just *can't stand* all these people, cutting down trees just to put in solar panels," Sally said. Her voice crackled, and I could tell she was hurt. I wanted to reassure her, to let her know we would never knowingly do anything cruel.

"We won't have to cut down a single tree, not one," I said. "The panels will be like the wind turbines. We've got enough empty space out back to put up a few rows of—"

"That's another thing I'd like to talk to you about," she said. "Between the windmills and the solar panels, I really think the birds will have a hard time. You need to dismantle those turbines. There's no telling how many birds you've personally killed. It's violent. It's *evil*— you know that it's *killing* the birds."

“Oh, well,” I said. “I haven’t noticed any dead birds near the turbines before, and they’ve been up for seven years, so … I would think if it were a problem, we’d already be noticing it.”

“That’s the thing,” Sally said. Her tone was scalding, erratic, unhinged. “Maybe you just aren’t looking hard enough. Maybe *you* just *don’t care* enough.”

I went silent. I felt a little like I’d been slapped, but I tried to rein it in. I tried not to act out of anger. I didn’t know what I should say to her. What response is appropriate, when someone is questioning your ability to conduct your own business?

I suddenly realized *that* was why I found Sally annoying. Her presence was an interference. So I told her what I thought would get her off of my back.

“Sally Alonso, you’re acting like Don Quixote,” I said, trying to force a laugh to sound more lighthearted. “It must be that Spaniards have an innate fear of windmills!”

She was absolutely silent on the other end of the call. At first, I thought she was preparing an insult. My second thought, rather selfishly, was that I'd shocked her so badly— in pushing back—that she'd had a heart attack and died. I could picture her slumped over, phone on the floor, struggling to get back to—

"You are a *bigot*, Carmen Ramos," Sally spat. I'd almost gotten used to the idea of her never speaking again, and I felt more upset to hear her voice than to hear her words.

I said nothing, and we sat in silence for at least a minute.

"You are closed-minded," Sally finally said. "You have so much hate for Spain and Spanish history, for no reason whatsoever l, and you can't even deny it."

"Sally," I said, trying my damndest to sound kind. "Sally, my family has lived in Texas since before it was a republic. And *I'm* part Spanish, you know? I mean, you're one of my cousins. So I feel like I'm well within my rights to make a *joke* about an old book."

“You’re joking about my compassion for the birds. You’re also being derogatory and disrespectful, saying something like that. Quixote is an icon.”

I almost told her that Don Quixote wasn’t real, and that she herself wasn’t acting like a real person, but I bit my tongue. I didn’t want to be awful. I’m not a nice person, but I’m not hateful. And I didn’t want to be hateful to my own family. For better or worse, Sally was family.

And Sally being passionate wasn’t necessarily a bad thing— but this wasn’t about passion. Her attitude was awful. She was dismissive of other peoples’ real needs in pursuit of something more “meaningful.” It felt, in some ways, like she didn’t *want* to see reality.

I felt like Sally might be trying to be difficult as a way of getting attention— that that might be the only way she received any attention at all. I felt sorry for her.

But I still didn’t like her.

"Sally, I — I'm sorry that anything I said made you feel that uncomfortable. But I also want to let you know you're not changing my mind about either the solar farm or the windmills. I'll be hanging up now."

I didn't wait for her answer. I just ended the call.

"*Fortune is guiding our affairs better than we could have ever hoped*," Don Quixote foolishly told Sancho Panza, the day they attacked the windmills on the plain.

Fortune, however, was on my side. A week after our phone call, Sally Alonso had attempted to dismantle another farmer's solar panels *and* a pump jack, both of which were on some politician's cousin's ranch.

Sally was almost certainly looking at some sort of felony property-damage-type charges. Her trial was set for June. I knew which date, and even which courtroom, but I didn't plan on going. I didn't want her to see me, and I certainly didn't want to see her.

Part of me wanted to feel sorry for Sally, but I felt relief at the prospect of being out of her domineering reach. I wasn't Dulcinea. I wasn't Sancha Panza. I wasn't Rocinante— and I wouldn't let her ride me roughshod.

I was my own person. And my windmills? Well, they're not mills — they're *turbines*. But they're not so easily dismantled. They only bend to the wind.

Maranon Essentials Kitten

I was shopping for a boyfriend I don't even have when I stumbled across the kitten. I'd spent fifteen minutes scrolling through the options under *Gifts For Him*. The suggestions all seemed similar: colognes, leather wallets, corny t-shirts. I couldn't buy any of this stuff. I'd be too ashamed to give someone a shirt that says *Home of The Red, White, & Brew*.

I tried to think of what kind of gift *I* would want. I always liked something heartfelt — something original, something slightly different, something affordable. I realized I wasn't going to find a good deal on anything sweet or unique, so I decided to go back to shopping for some essentials. I needed more toothpaste, and I also needed to buy some conditioner. Fortunately for me, Maranon — the shopping siteI always use — has its own line of cheapo health and beauty products. They market these as Maranon Essentials.

By buying the Essentials-branded products, I could pay less for things like mouthwash and toilet paper. I didn't really think twice about doing this, mostly because the stuff was decent enough. The toilet paper might be 0.5 ply, and the bristles on the toothbrushes might be too hard, but I could make things work — especially when I reminded myself how much money I was saving. The people at

Maranon were really helping me survive on a meager budget. So when I saw the Maranon Essentials Kitten, I felt like I had to buy one. It was such a good deal.

The Maranon Essentials Kitten was an eight-week old kitten. It weighed two pounds, and it came with six cans of cat food, so its first few meals would be covered. If I spent one hundred more dollars, they would go ahead and spay or neuter the kitten. I decided to pay a little extra for a properly-spayed kitten, because I'm trying to be more considerate and more ethical with my purchases, even though it's admittedly hard to do. I also believe in animal welfare, so I figured I ought to get the poor thing fixed. Spend money up front to save money down the road, you know? I can only afford to feed one kitten, anyway — no mother cats for me!

The day the kitten arrived, I was happy to see they'd delivered the brown tabby and not the orange one. Several people in the reviews complained about receiving a kitten that was the wrong color or pattern. One person even got a cat instead of a kitten — and they posted several pictures alongside an angry review. But I had nothing to complain about. My kitten was perfect. It *did* try to bark once, but I knew that occasional glitches and hitches were pretty standard. And it also tried to

bite me, but its teeth weren't really sharp. Come to think of it, it doesn't seem to have teeth *or* claws. That's probably why they sent cans of pâté instead of shreds.

I like the kitten so far, though. It seems pretty typical, just like a regular cat. It's been so long since I've lived with a cat. My parents had one, back when I was in grade school, but we picked him up at the animal shelter.

The animal shelter was a place where abandoned pets stayed until they were picked by a person or family. The shelters were full of older dogs and cats, mostly. I wonder, do they even have those kinds of shelters anymore? I don't really know. I went online to buy all of the pets I've had.

And I've only ever bought kittens or puppies. I just can't help it — I only buy new things. I can't imagine buying something pre-owned. It just doesn't seem cool or sophisticated — and I'm just trying to live my best life. I've got to be fair to me, you know? I deserve a good deal.

Give Me Space

When I was in elementary school, my parents bought me a book about astronomy— the night sky, the planets, the solar system. I fell in love with the outer planets and the most distant stars. I was fascinated with the diamond rain on Neptune, and I read up on the blue giants. But I was most fascinated by the moon, because I saw it every night. It was more familiar. It felt like a friend.

In second grade, our class was assigned to do a presentation on a planet or another celestial body. There were probably about a dozen of us kids, and I imagine those who didn't write about a planet got to write about comets or asteroids. I wanted to write about the moon, but the teacher told me to write about Mars instead.

This was when I was seven, the age where I would sit in class and pick at the hair gel that had dried on my head earlier that morning. I was an odd kid, and I was aware that I was different— but I was also super sensitive. I could *be* weird, but I would get upset if someone *called me* weird, if I felt judged, if I felt slighted. I cried when my best friend was assigned to write about the moon. But the teacher had asked me to write about Mars, so I would have to get familiar with another part of the solar system. I would have to familiarize myself with something new. I would have to trace a new orbit.

Mars was alien to me. My parents took me to the supermarket, so that we could buy something for my presentation—poster board, markers, and a little red ball. When we bought that red ball, I told myself that I would learn to like Mars. Mars was a new toy, after all—or it would be, after the presentation was over. This second, smaller Mars probably lives on—as a deflated plastic shell—in my parent's garage or shed.

I liked Mars well enough, but it didn't have diamond rain, or rings, or even martians. Time passed, and we both kept orbiting. A year ago, Mars reached its perihelion on my birthday. Mars seemed closer than ever before. My old friend, somehow moving in sync with me.

Venus was once my favorite planet to spot late at night or early in the morning. Now, more often than not, I find myself looking for Saturn. I had developed a new obsession, even though I always liked the outer planets.

Around 2010 or 2011, I often listened to "My Girls," the bouncy, electrifying Animal Collective song. The song sampled recordings from the Cassini space probe. The idea of collaborating with a planet (and a satellite) was mesmerizing—a gas giant with a songwriting credit.

Which planet is the most creative? Which planet is the most destructive? Why do I get the feeling that I live on the most calamitous planet?

When I first started looking for Saturn in the night sky, I would face the wrong direction. I would find myself looking at Jupiter instead. I didn't really know what I should be looking for. I only knew that I needed to be looking for something bigger than myself.

I finally found it. It was visible, even though it was 800 million miles away. It was just across the way, somewhere near Aquarius— right where it was supposed to be.

Afterword

I wrote each of these short stories back in my twenties — the only exception being *Stragglers*, which I wrote the year I turned thirty.

When I first started writing I was afraid to share my work. I initially used a pseudonym: *Lampley Miguet*. This collection is the first time that all of these works have been published together, and the first time that all of these stories have been published under a single name.

I'm sure that, someday, I'll look back at all of this and cringe. I'll wish I'd kept the pen name, or I'll wish that I'd approached certain stories from different angles. There are already bits and pieces that the thirty-one-year-old version of me wants to correct or omit — but the twenty-four-year-old version of me would be glad that I've preserved her work.

Instead of looking back and cringing, I hope that I'll show both the twenty-something and the thirty-something a little grace.

And to anyone who reads these stories — thank you.